

by LGBR

1. Chapter 1

They were Marines fresh out of boot camp, green as grass. They were also very tired. They had gone from stop to stop on a long string of space flights, finally ending up at _September_ Station. It was a refit and repair station set back from the front line, but close enough to get a steady supply of ships. The Marines were waiting for assignment, probably to the next ship that came in. If they were assigned to a ship, they would get to go into the fight, the war against the Covenant. While it was true the Covenant were a superior force and they were likely to get killed, anything was better than sitting around waiting for the Covenant to find their planet. In the Marines, they had a chance to make some difference, or at least to take a few aliens down with them.

Jonathan walked up behind the crowd, struggling to get a look at the screen. A different Marine stepped up, tapped a few icons, and then told everyone, "Looks like TWO ships comin' in, boys! We're bound to

get on one of 'em!" A cheer went up. The man motioned for them to quiet down, looking closely at the schedules. "Uh-huh, we got the Orion - she's a destroyer," (another cheer), "and the Winter Moon, looks like a Halcyon class." The Marines had stopped listening at the mention of a destroyer-class vessel. Destroyers were one of the best ships in the Navy - tough, speedy, and armed to the teeth. They had two MAC cannons, twenty-six oversized Archer missile pods, and three Shiva nukes. They were in action everywhere. Most of the Marines were already thinking what it would be like on the Orion.

Pasley took a moment to consider the alternative. The other ship - the Winter Moon - was a Halcyon class vessel. He scratched his head a moment, straining his memory. Surely he'd heard something . . . then he remembered. They were the smallest vessel ever to receive the cruiser designation; Halcyons were the size of stretched frigates. They were slow, underpowered, and had relatively thin armor. In fact, they were forty years old, ancient in terms of ship design. They were tough, though. The hull was filled with honeycombing and hydraulic reinforcements, which made it nearly indestructible. They had been known to survive in battle with breaches to all compartments and ninety percent of their armor gone. Regardless of how tough they were, however, they could still be overwhelmed by Covenant plasma weapons, even if it took a little longer. It would be much preferable to be on a vessel that had a fighting chance to destroy the enemy.

Jonathan's thoughts were interrupted by a sound over the intercoms, an announcement: "All Marine platoons, report to assembly hall in ten minutes for assignment. Full uniform is mandatory." The Marines practically danced. "Yeah! No more waiting around on this godforsaken station!" someone cheered. They scrambled to grab their gear and get dressed, and jogged out toward the assembly hall.

Less than five minutes later (they had all rushed double-time), the Marines were assembled in neat lines. Each platoon tried to outdo the other with their order and discipline. All of them stuck out their chests and stood up straight, trying to look stoic. They stood proudly in crisp uniforms and snapped attention in unison when the Staff Sergeant stepped to the stage in front of them, holding a data pad. He cleared his throat before speaking.

"At ease!" They all shifted at once. "All right men, as you know we have two UNSC vessels coming in from the frontline, and some of you are going to get duty on them. We understand that both the Winter Moon and the Orion are in need of almost a full complement of Marines, not to mention quite a few other hands. The destroyer also needs pilots." Destroyers didn't often carry single-ship fighters. The Orion, apparently, was of a less-common design. "Pilots from Squadrons A and B, report to Docking Bay 3 for duty on the Orion."

Jonathan, standing in the rows and lines of Marines, stole a glance at his little brother. He had light brown hair and stood a little higher than the rest of the pilot, who were mostly women. Big for his age, David Pasley nonetheless had a talent for flying. He was one of the pilots in B Squadron, which meant he was on his way to war. And on a destroyer, no less. He caught David's eye and grinned encouragement. David smiled back.

The Staff Sergeant continued his orders: "Now we take care of the crew. All hands from Groups F through H report to Docking Bay 7 for duty on the _Winter Moon_. Groups I through M, and the 31st Engineers, report down at Docking Bay 3. All the rest of you ship crew, you're waiting for the next vessel. Is that clear?" he asked in a booming voice.

"Sir Yes sir!" hundreds of voices returned.

"All right, then. Dismissed!" he yelled back. The crewmen all flooded out of the assembly hall, leaving only the anxious Marines. Jonathan watched his brother go, hoping he, too might be assigned to the _Orion_.

"Okay, Marines, I want all of you in K Platoon..." all eyes shifted to K Platoon. Jonathan tensed. He was in K Platoon. "...to report to Bay 7," the Sergeant finished. Jonathan didn't listen to the rest of the Sergeant's orders. He was in a daze, not believing he was actually going into the war. Even if it was on a flying junk heap like the _Winter Moon_.

"You mean that thing actually flies?" someone asked, incredulously. Everyone in Docking Bay 7 took a long look at the _Winter Moon_, docked in space outside. Compared to other United Nations Space Command ships, she was small. But from where they were standing, she looked massive. She also looked like she was on her last legs. The armor plating was blackened and cracked in patches, and the portside emergency thrusters were used up. One of the launch bays had plates hastily welded over it, with yellow and black warning paint. There was a large hole in the underside of the ship, surrounded by plasma scorching. Jonathan wouldn't have been surprised if he heard the reactors could only go to 20 power.

"I hope it's a lot better inside than it is outside," someone else remarked. The Marines in Jonathan's platoon - K Platoon - shuffled over to the entrance to the boarding arm. A harassed-looking dockhand stood there. He addressed them, "You men K Platoon?"

The Corporal in charge spoke up: "Yes, sir. We've been ordered to report here for duty on the _Winter Moon_."

"Good," the dockhand replied, staring at a datapad, "it looks like she's due for some reinforcement." He didn't look at them, and they weren't sure whether he was talking to the Corporal or himself. "Not to mention some repairs," he continued, "that will take some time." He glanced back up at them. "Go on in, you men might as well get yourselves settled; she's gonna be in dock for at least 37 hours," he said, gesturing distractedly at the entrance to the docking arm. The Corporal thanked him and they were on their way inside.

After a long walk down the docking arm, the men emerged from the airlock into a hallway. It was empty. "That's odd," the Corporal noted, "there's nobody here to welcome us." It was strange that no one was there to give them orders.

"Where do we go?" Jonathan asked the Marine next to him.

He made a face and said, "How should I know?"

The Marines milled about until they were pushed into the halls by

another groups of soldiers coming from the docking arm behind them. They, too, were in the middle of asking where they should go when someone spoke up, in a British accent. "Okay, recruits, what do they call you?" The speaker was a large, dark-skinned Lieutenant standing near the fringe of their group. Nobody had noticed him walk up. They stared at him, surprised, when the Corporal stumbled forward and found his voice.

"Sir, we are A and K Platoons, reporting for duty on the Winter Moon." He saluted the Lieutenant hastily.

The Lieutenant regarded them with amusement, and boomed out loudly: "That's good, boys, 'cause we're sorely in need of soldiers. Follow me, Platoons; we'll get you sorted out." With that, he proceeded down the hall and the Marines filed after him.

They emerged into a small chamber, with double doors in front of them. A small window was set into the wall nearby, with a pudgy-looking man behind it. The Brit Lieutenant turned to them and said, "Be advised, men, that there is a constant chance of battle here. Regulations aren't tight, but justice is swift and sure. And, you must be properly prepared for combat."

The pudgy man behind the window took over. "All you troops, step over here. We need to get you recorded and registered. Line up!" Jonathan got in a queue behind the other Marines, and the line slowly moved forward. Jonathan approached the window. The man behind it barely looked at him, belting out: "Name!"

Jonathan replied, "Private Jonathan Pasley, sir." He handed the man his military ID.

"In K Platoon, I see?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!" Pasley responded.

"All right, Private, move on through those doors there. Next!" he barked. Jonathan moved through the doors hesitantly. A nurse stood there, holding an arm out impatiently. "Okay, I'm gonna need that uniform."

"What?" Jonathan asked, surprised.

"The uniform. Take it off. Or do you want me to avert my eyes?" she sneered. Jonathan stripped to his boxers and gave the nurse the uniform. "Go on, over there," she pointed, already looking to the next soldier.

Jonathan walked over to the next station, where a soldier stood on a platform as metal columns rotated slowly around him, glowing blue. A medical tech watched nearby. There was a line. Jonathan stood at the back. An MP stood nearby. The next Marine stepped onto the panel, and the columns spun halfway around him before a shrill warning tone went off. The columns halted and turned blood-red.

The MP walked over to the tech's screen, examined it, and addressed the Marine, "You H. Johnson?" The Marine nodded, gulping. "Come with me," he said, and led Johnson out of the room. Then it was Jonathan's turn. The MP returned, and watched him suspiciously over his sunglasses. Jonathan cracked his knuckles nervously, wondering what

had happened.

"Step on the white panel please," the tech asked, tapping a few keys. Jonathan stepped over onto the white floor plate. "Just stand still, hold your arms at your sides." Pasley watched as the columns spun slowly around him. "This is just a simple health test and drug scan," the tech said, still typing. Jonathan stole a glance at the MP, who was watching the screens carefully. Finally the columns stopped, and the tech said, "You're clean. Move on, recruit."

A medic caught his eye, and ordered: "Come on, Private, keep it moving. Sit down here," he gestured at a chair. Jonathan sat. The medic brought out an intimidating tool with three needles, and a pistol grip underneath. "We just have to give you a few shots," the medic said matter-of-factly, lowering the needle to Jonathan's arm.

"Immune system booster," he jabbed Jonathan's arm and pulled the trigger. A blue liquid shot into his veins. It felt like ice. The needles revolved, and another one came to the top. "A muscle tone enhancer," he stabbed again, and this one burned like wildfire. "...and a gland accelerator. Makes you produce more adrenaline." He stuck another needle in, pulled the trigger, and stood back. Jonathan immediately felt a sharp pain in his stomach, and a dizzying nausea. He bent double, suppressing a groan. "Don't worry, the pain's normal. It'll pass in a few minutes. You can leave, Private. Go through that door."

He stumbled his way through the doors, clutching his stomach. A desk sat nearby, with a crewman behind it. "C'mon! Walk it off!" he grated at Jonathan. "Get over here!" Jonathan straightened up painfully and made himself walk to the desk, which was covered in grayish uniforms. He looked Jonathan up and down, sizing him up, and handed him a uniform. "Next! Move faster! Drag your ass over here!" he yelled at the next stumbling recruit. Jonathan tripped his way over to the wall, where he steadied himself and waited for his head to stop spinning.

He struggled into the uniform and stood straight, forcing himself to ignore his wrenching gut. He hobbled down the hall into a chamber where most of the Marines were grouped, waiting. A few minutes later all of the Marines of the two platoons were assembled. The Brit-speaking Lieutenant was back, and stood at the head of the group. He spoke, "All right, boys, I'm Lieutenant Lewis. I'm gonna take you to the bunkrooms, and you can get a little R & R. Sounds good, right?" A few men mumbled a tired approval. "Right then, mount up!"

For the first time Jonathan noticed the small convoy behind the Lieutenant. An M112 Light Reconnaissance Vehicle led at the front, a four-wheel-drive armored beast of a jeep with four electric engines. The troops gave them the nickname 'Warthog'. Most were armed with chainguns, but this one had a bench seat instead. Behind the Warthog were three trucks. The M117B 'Cuatro' truck had a lengthened Warthog's body, but with a flatbed in back, surrounded by a rollcage. The Marines flooded to the Cuatros and piled in. They started with a peculiar whining rumble, and cruised slowly away.

Pasley sat in the back of a Cuatro, watching the scene around him groggily. The truck emerged from the small chamber into a massive

one, and they turned onto a raised two-lane highway in the center. They were entering the motor pool. Rows of vehicles, Warthogs and Cuatros, stood in front of bays set into the wall. A few Pelicans sat in racks a hundred feet above, receiving attention from repair crew nearby. The motor pool was buzzing with activity, and small trams rushed around, laden with deckhands. They left the motor pool on the highway and drove for a few minutes. Jonathan watched the walls, thinking. The plates on the wall were pitted with age, and there were stains all over the road. Everything on the Winter Moon seemed battle-worn. Even the Cuatro he rode in was scratched and dented.

Jonathan looked up, startled, when the truck jolted off the road and stopped.

The Lt. yelled, "Everybody out!" and hopped out of the Warthog. The troops followed suit, and got out of the three Cuatros, snatching their gear. Before everyone was out, the Lt. ordered: "Follow me, men. Quick march!" He started to jog down a hallway nearby. The Marines ran after him. Jonathan jogged awkwardly, his heavy duffel bag in one hand. He stopped, slung it across his back, and sprinted to catch up. Soon they reached a set of double doors, which read 'Marine Quarters B' above them. The Lieutenant stopped in front, and waited for all of them to catch up before speaking.

"Men, you are no longer members of K or A Platoon. When you enter this room, you will be considered members of one of the finest companies on the ship, the 25th Tactical. We sustained heavy losses at the Battle of Sigma Octanus, so you men get to fill in the gaps. We're proud to have you." He made a salute and the men proudly saluted back. The Lt. flung the doors wide.

Jonathan expected to see at least a platoon of veterans sitting around, perhaps making jokes about the greenhorns. Instead he found there were only a few men at the corners of the room. They sat in dirty uniforms with haggard, gaunt faces. One or two raised their head at the other Marines' entry. The rest paid them no heed. The other Marines gawked. Surely these few men couldn't be the remains of a whole company?

"Right then, all of you are now soldiers in the 25th Tactical Company. Technically, you aren't crew members yet, so your time is free. Use it to get acquainted with the Winter Moon. Or grab yourself a bunk and rest up. Unless I missed my guess, we'll be in dock for a few days for repairs. I've got to check up on making sure you're all in, nice and official. I expect you to be ready for duty at any time!" They stood at ease and watched as the Lt. left the room.

The greenies eyed the ragged soldiers, and gravitated to the corner farthest from them. Jonathan chose a bunk relatively close to the veterans, but the vets ignored him and played cards. Undaunted, Pasley stuffed his duffel bag under the bunk and climbed into the bed, tired. He stared at the mattress of the bunk above, wondering how David was doing on the Orion. Before he knew it his eyes were closed and he was asleep.

"Okay, Lieutenant Pasley. Start your engines whenever you like," the crewman in the control deck said. "You'll pull out after A7." David Pasley sat in a padded flight chair, and looked into his helmet's HUD. The engines showed green. He hit a few buttons and his ship's engines rumbled to life, the noise elevating to a shriek. David knew the sound would be ear-piercing for the deck crew outside. The F42B/C1 Longsword interceptor was quick, and for a craft of it's size quite maneuverable.

David watched as the last other Longsword in his squadron, A7, pulled out. He pushed the thrust lever forward a touch and the Longsword moved slowly out of the launch bay. As he approached the launch strip he shoved the thrust lever to the redline and the interceptor leapt forward, the blast from the engines blowing over a few boxes. He rocketed out of the bay, emerging into the blackness of space. He looked at the planet floating nearby, Girandihar II, a ball of blue, green and white. A sense of vertigo pervaded him, but it quickly passed. His stomach didn't have time to settle, however.

The wing leader spoke over the intercom: "All right boys and girls, let's put 'em through their paces. Try and keep up with me, okay?" David knew Lt. Nitoka must be grinning as she said that. She was an amazing pilot, and loved testing her skills against the other pilots of her wing. But David knew he could keep pace with her, maybe even beat her. This time.

Nitoka's ship blasted forward and the other ships gunned the engines, flying alongside. The Longsword took a sharp pull upwards, almost 90 degrees. The rest of the wing followed, tracking her actions closely. Before everyone had made the upward bend, Nitoka shot into a series of banking, high-gee turns.

"Lose anyone yet?" Nitoka taunted. "No? Well, maybe that's because I'm not trying. Let's see how you handle this maneuver." Her Longsword jumped downward into a half-loop, her cockpit now facing 'down'. She went straight from this maneuver into a spiraling corkscrew, and a loop. Most of the other pilots tried to fly in formation around Nitoka, and went hurtling off into space.

"I'm out!" one of the pilots said, as her fighter spun crazily. Now there were only three pilots, and David was still in the race. He felt he had left his stomach behind in space somewhere, but he ignored it, pouring all his concentration into flying. He followed every move Nitoka made with his eyes, and shortly after with his interceptor.

Nitoka had gone into a banking turn with a reverse when something came on one of the channels. David started at the static, sending his Longsword tumbling. _No! Lost again!_ He thought, bringing his fist down on the controls. He suddenly remembered the message and listened.

". . . Say again, Covenant vessel spotted in vicinity of _Orion_. All Longsword squadrons ordered to engage Covenant fighters in the area." The race quickly ended, and the fighters immediately assembled into formation. Nitoka began barking orders: "Everyone, this is it. Stay in formation. We will launch Argent S missiles at medium range. We will then break formation and engage any bogeys. Understood?" All of the pilots acknowledged their orders. "Okay, people, let's make it happen!"

The formation jettied into a one-eighty degree flip and afterburned toward the Covenant vessel. At a distance it looked almost like a toy. As they closed with it, however, it became more sinister and terrifying. It was an odd shade of purple-blue, and made of round, organic shapes. A black stripe along the side began to light up, motes of red light collecting into a solid, bright line. David had heard stories about it. He knew that, once fully charged, the Covenant ship would be able to launch massive, bluish torpedoes made of pure plasma. If his fighter got in the way of one of those, it would be vaporized. Not even dust would be left. Fortunately, they seemed to use these bolts exclusively as ship-to-ship weapons. They had more accurate, short range weapons for hitting fighters. He shivered.

David looked up, and they were approaching the Covenant vessel quickly. Small red triangles appeared on his HUD, designating enemy fighters. The Office of Naval Intelligence called them Seraphs, and they were smooth and bulbous, teardrop-shaped. They were also more than a match for the Longsword, especially due to the shimmering, silvery energy shields that protected them from damage.

A timer appeared on David's display, along with the words 'Argent Launch'. It read 00:15. David quickly flipped up the cover on the Argent safeties and armed them. He centered the target on one of the alien fighters, and a firing solution came up at the bottom of the display. The Seraphs loomed closer, much closer. "Aim for the Seraphs, just a few more seconds. Keep steady," Nitoka comforted them. David's hands began to sweat. The Seraphs were almost at point-blank range. The timer still read 00:07. His hand crept to the firing control and he counted down in his head. _Five . . . four . . . _ the leading Seraph fired and the others followed, the bolts of greenish fire hurtling toward them. _Three . . . two . . . one . . . _ the shot loomed closer _it was going to hit him and he was going to die and . . . _

"Missiles away! Break! Break!" Nitoka yelled. David jabbed the firing button and pulled up and right hard, and the green boiling plasma blew by under his left wing. Most of the Seraphs moved nimbly out of the way of the missile strikes, but a few took direct hits and their shields overloaded and failed. "Engage enemy fighters!" Nitoka ordered. David turned his bank into a half-loop, turning over and coming down behind a Seraph. He armed the 40mm cannon and watched the target reticule, trying to line up a shot. His aft proximity warning bleeped, and he knew a Seraph must be behind him. He ignored it, knowing his Longsword could take the hit; he wanted to shoot down one of those alien bastards! He lined up a shot on the Seraph in front of him.

He pulled the trigger and the 40mm strobed. Bullets slashed the weaving Seraph, and its shield shimmered silver. It dodged, but David followed it with his shots. A few seconds, and David knew its shield must be almost down, so he de-safed an Argent S and locked on, when another warning sound toned. The heat and radiation counts jumped and his brain screamed _plasma!_ But by then it was too late, and a green glow surrounded him briefly before the bolt struck his ship and his cockpit exploded, taking him with it. The acidic green became black.

"Whoa, Pasley, it's okay. Calm down. What, you thought you were

dead?" There was a laugh. David lifted the visor over his eyes, breathing hard. The light blinded him for a moment. He looked up to see one of the crewmen, only then feeling the comforting hands on his shoulders. His flight suit was covered in sweat, and the chair he was sitting in was soaked, too.

He unstrapped himself and finally responded, "Yeah, I guess I got a little too into it. Still, they make these sims pretty real, don't they?" He forced a laugh. The crewman looked at him sympathetically.

"Yeah, I guess they do," he said, and walked away. David was left shaking his head, trying to still his pounding heart. The other pilots were still in the sim, and he watched them 'flying'. They manipulated the sticks and footpedals deftly, occasionally jerking the controls. Doubtless they were performing some challenging maneuver. Nitoka snarled and David knew she must have gotten something, Seraph or otherwise.

He sighed, wishing there was something to do. Nobody was there to talk to; there were only three techs monitoring the sim. Occasionally they looked up at their screens, interested, but not much. They probably had seen a lot of flight sims. Anyway, they were inside a little room set apart from the sim room, so there wasn't much point in trying to start a conversation.

He sat down on a curved couch, and reviewed the flight. The maneuver practice had gone well; he had kept up with Nitoka until the very end, and probably would have gone farther if the orders from the bridge hadn't distracted him. Once the fighting started though, he'd had trouble staying in formation, and almost broke. His biggest mistake, though, was ignoring the fighter behind him in order to strike the one in front. Apparently the Longsword's armor didn't do much in the face of plasma weapons. Maybe it burned through the armor. Or maybe the Covenant pilot had just gotten lucky . . . but it wouldn't be a good idea to assume that. Next time, he'd have to be a lot more careful, and more evasive. Who knew? Maybe the Covenant were not as good as their simulation versions. Or . . . they could be better. David brooded over this, but soon took his mind from such thoughts. They weren't pleasant.

3. Chapter 3

"Good morning, troops!" the clear voice of Lieutenant Lewis rang out in a British accent. The lights flared as he entered the room. Jonathan shielded his eyes and sat up, his head aching from the glare. The Lt. waited. The green Marines around the room groaned, tired. The vets were already up and showered, putting on their uniforms. "Company, I want you up and ready in ten minutes for some announcements." All the new recruits stumbled to the showers. Wondering what the Lt. was going to say, Jonathan took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and threw on his new uniform. All of them stood in a line and waited.

"All right, here's what I've got. Turns out we won't be leaving for a few days; apparently the repairs are going to take some time. I don't think that we were that heavily damaged, and I've got word of an overhaul of the engines. Maybe an upgrade. This ship could use it. After a few days we will be leaving for Reach, and are scheduled to

be in dock there for at least twenty-four hours. Can't tell what for.

"Next on the list," he fiddled with a datapad, "ah ... Greenies, even with you onboard we are understaffed. So, all of you will receive assignments for alternate duty. The duty roster will be posted outside the mess hall. Also, for you new men there is a mandatory firing range practice after breakfast. I'll see you there. In the mean time, report to the mess hall for breakfast! That said, you are dismissed!" The Lt. waited for them to leave, then took a place at the back of the line.

The men of the 25th all marched to the mess hall, and waited in line. There were not many troops in the cafeteria, aside from one company at almost full strength. Jonathan moved down the line, behind some of the veterans. They picked up trays and were served a slab of meat covered in a greenish sauce.

"That's downright disgusting!" a Marine said, staring at the stuff and holding his stomach.

"What's the matter, son, your stomach too fine for this stuff?" one of the vets asked mockingly. He lifted a spoonful of the stuff and jiggled it in the air before putting it slowly to his mouth. "Mmm, good stuff," he said, licking his lips. The first Marine looked sick.

Jonathan got through the line and looked to the tables. He spotted a table with only three Marines, and sat down at it. They looked up at him, and went back to chewing. One was husky, the second thin, and the last average. Jonathan put his tray down and poked at the meat with his knife. He juggled it between knife and fork and stuck a piece in his mouth. It tasted and chewed like rubber. "Wonder what they make this crap out of? It tastes like cardboard," he said, hoping to elicit a response from the others at the table.

They sat silent, chewing. Finally the husky one spoke up: "I don't know, but it's sure not meat." Jonathan smiled a little. He read the man's name tag: Pearce, J. His uniform made him to be a Private. They once more ate without speaking for a while. Pearce looked up thoughtfully. "I'm not sure about you guys, but I'm not looking forward to fighting any Covenant. I hear they have guns that'll burn through your leg in a second. And armor that reflects our bullets."

"That's bull. Just rumors," the thin Marine -- Schneider, M -- said.

Before anyone could respond, a man at a table nearby turned toward them. He had a patch over one eye, and a hollow-looking face. He spoke in a gravelly voice. "You may scoff, greenhorn, but that one's right," he indicated Pearce. "At least, it's true for some of them Covenant. They're two and a half meters tall and covered in blue armor, with slits for eyes. You can shoot all you want, the bullets just bounce off." His manner became more frantic. "Their whole right arm is a huge gun. Just one of them roasted my whole platoon. They'll go through you in a second! A freakin' second!"

Another vet reached over and firmly grasped the first's shoulder. "Leo, stop scarin' the greenies. They don't need that." He gave them

an apologetic glance and pulled the man away from them.

"Pssh. He's just trying to freak us out, that's all," Schneider admonished. "One good shot between the eyes will take down any Covenant bastard you can point a gun at," he said. The rest of them weren't so sure.

Later all of the new Marines left the Winter Moon and met at the firing range on the Station, for weapons practice. They assembled in rows and waited for instruction. Lt. Lewis was there watching, and the rangemaster soon began giving orders from the head of the range.

"All right Marines, today we are having a firing drill, to get you more familiar with all the standard-issue infantry weapons. You may consider this a test, so do your best. No screwing around." He went over to a desk behind a wire mesh screen, and the Corporal there handed him a weapon. He held it up for all to see.

"This will be the weapon most of you will be issued. It is the MA6C2, a.k.a. the 'Battle Rifle', the standard rifle of the UNSC Marine Corps. Most of you will be familiar with the MA5B used in training, but this is a whole different animal. Though it is also a bullpup design, this gun fires a 9.6mm armor-piercing bullet from a full-size gas-propellant rifle shell. It is much more accurate and powerful than the MA5B, but its automatic fire rate is slower, due to the recoil generated by the 9.6mm cartridge, and the Kessering-design action. They are issued with a 2x magnification scope which can be smart-linked to your eyepiece. Or you can use your eyes, like you will be doing on the range today. You get forty shells per mag. Two mags, one practice, one for credit. Step up, get a rifle!" the rangemaster finished. The Marines quickly did so, each taking a battle rifle and moving back to their spots on the range. The targets slid on tracks backwards, until they were much farther downrange.

"Range is hot! When you are ready, commence firing!" the rangemaster barked. Jonathan took a moment to examine the gun in his hands, and already liked it. He had an affection for guns, especially rifles. As he picked it up, the gun automatically released the safety. Jonathan guessed it weighed at nine and a half pounds. He shouldered the weapon and sighted down the scope at the target. He pulled the trigger and the gun boomed. It had surprisingly little recoil considering the size of the cartridge. He put the gun down but realized he had forgotten to see how he'd shot. He lifted the gun again and looked through the scope at the target. There was a large hole carved an eighth of an inch from the bullseye. He smiled appreciatively. He rolled the scope aside--it was hinged--to look down the steel sights, and used the rest of his magazine for short, controlled bursts. Only seven shots missed the target. One of the vets looked over at him, showing his approval with a quick nod. Jonathan changed magazines quickly, grinning.

For Jonathan, the rest of the day went quickly. Sometimes it was just fun. They went through firing drills with a number of weapons, including the M6D pistol, M43R sub-machinegun, the M80 shotgun, and even the S2AM sniper rifle. They also got to try out the Jackhammer rocket launcher, firing dummy rockets at solid targets. Jonathan didn't fare too well with that; he found aiming the launcher from his shoulder cumbersome.

During the practice, computers tracked and logged each 'credit' shot they took, and sensors in the target judged the accuracy of each. After drills, each of them was given a card with their performance on it. Number of shots fired, accuracy, and points scored were all represented. Jonathan looked at his card. He was average with most of the weapons, but had been bad with the rocket launcher. His scores with the MA6C2 were good, though. He smiled looking at the _accuracy: 77_ printed on the card. That earned him the Sharpshooter designation. Good, but not good enough to qualify for sniper training. It didn't matter to him anyway. He liked the feel of the MA6C2 in his hands. Hearing scuffling feet, he looked up and realized everyone was leaving.

The other Marines filed out, and Jonathan wondered where he would go. The Lt. had told them they had free time until lunch. He wandered down the hall. He knew some of the other Marines and thought about following them, but decided not to. He hadn't had time to make any real friends. He thought of the people he used to know back at home, but pushed the thoughts away. They only served to make him homesick.

"Hey, wait up!" someone yelled behind him. He looked back to see two figures jogging up behind him. One was skinny, the other husky. As they approached he saw that it was Schneider and Pierce from the mess hall. They moved up beside him, panting.

"Where are you going?" Pearce asked.

"I don't know, just wandering. We have a couple hours until lunch," Jonathan responded.

Schneider spoke up. "You know, they have great pool tables on the Station. Why don't we head down there?"

"Aren't we supposed to stay on the _Winter Moon_?" Jonathan pointed out.

"What else are we going to do? There's no harm in it. And the _Moon_'s gonna be stuck in dock for repairs for at least another two days," Schneider countered. Pearce showed his agreement, nodding and gesturing as if he was playing pool.

Jonathan thought for a second, and then put on a grin. "Why not?" They walked nonchalantly toward the elevator. It cruised downward and let them off; they slunk through to the halls to the airlocks. One of them was open, with a connection running to the Station. Making sure nobody was watching, they sneaked into the airlock and from there to the tunnel to _September_ Station.

4. Chapter 4

The men in the control room of _September_ Station were weary, and looked at their stations with bleary eyes. The officer in control - Chief Petty Officer O'Connor - looked at his timepiece and sighed. It would be another five hours at least before they got the _Orion_ out of dock, and twenty-seven hours for the _Winter Moon_. The Station didn't have its own AI to coordinate things. That meant they would have to keep a solid stream of men working in shifts the whole time.

Shifts, he thought, _at least_ _this one's almost over._

"All right men, you can stand down. Shift's about over and I . .
."

"Sir!" the communications officer interrupted. "Sorry, sir, but we have an urgent communication from _Pythagoras_ Sensing Station. Priority message, sir!"

The CPO straightened. A Priority message from . . . where? _Pythagoras_? He'd never heard of that station. Or had he? A bad feeling pulled at his gut.

"Bring up the message on my screen, Lieutenant!" he ordered. The com Lt. typed hurriedly. The screen at O'Connor's station flashed. It read:

**United Nations Space Command Emergency Priority Transmission
091-237-844**

Encryption Code: Red

Public Key: NA

From: Petty Officer Rendell, _Pythagoras_ Sensor Outpost

To: Chief Petty Officer O'Connor, _September_ Refit
Station

Subject: SLIPSPACE PROBE SCAN RESULTS

Classification: RESTRICTED

/start file/

CPO O'Connor, must report that _Pythagoras_ Outpost has detected anomalous mass in Slipspace moving on intercept course with you at high speed. Profile matches known Covenant vessels. Estimate three, possible four medium-tonnage vessels. May have reached you BEFORE this transmission. Recommend immediately carry out Cole Protocol, dispatch any UNSC vessels for protection, or evacuation. Godspeed.

/end file/

press **ENTER** to end

Oh my God, thought O'Connor. Covenant vessels were amazingly powerful and resilient. Most crewmen didn't know that UNSC vessels only defeated the Covenant when they outnumbered them three to one, and even then not without heavy casualties. Three against two was not good odds.

"Lieutenant, bring up the location of _Pythagoras_ Outpost relative to _September_ Station on my screen." The screen changed, and a star chart came up. _September_ Station was on one end, but where was _Pythagoras_? Then he noticed an icon flashing. His stomach jerked. It was close to the Station, barely a light-second away. The Covenant would be practically . . . there already.

"Sir I'm detecting something at extreme sensor range. Covenant sir, can't tell what class."

O'Connor knew he had to carry out the Cole Protocol.

"Listen up! Go to Combat Alert Alpha! I want these orders relayed to the _Orion_ and _Winter Moon_, and carried out here! I need a selective purge of all databases! Triple-check to make sure all data has been erased! Activate viral data scavengers, too! Make sure all of it is gone!"

"Aye, aye!" they stammered, scrambling to comply. The purge was according to Cole Protocol, to be sure the Covenant could not get the information they sought. Starcharts and surveys, in particular. The location of the Inner Colonies, and Earth. If they found Earth, humanity wouldn't last but a few days after it fell. And if the Covenant got to Earth, only a miracle could prevent it's destruction.

"Sir, I'm getting a request from the _Orion_ to leave port," the communications officer reported.

"Granted! Get our crew back over here, then blow all connections!" O'Connor barked.

"A request from the _Winter Moon_ as well, sir!"

"What's the status on the repairs!" O'Connor asked. The Ensign typed at a panicked pace.

"Engine refit almost done, engineers report she can run at up to eighty-five percent. One hundred-twenty if you give them two minutes."

"Wait two minutes, then evacuate the engineers and blow dock connections. Give them clearance as soon as that's done! Also, orient the station so the _Winter Moon_ can bring her cannons to bear."

"Yes, sir, already working on it! Any further orders?"

O'Connor knew the Cole Protocol required one last thing of them. It stated: _In case of imminent capture by Covenant forces, all UNSC ships MUST self-destruct_. He lifted a panel near his controls, and shifted the bar within from SAFE to DETONATE. He put his hand near the small, red button. He stopped, hesitating.

"No, Ensign," he said, hand hovering near the button, "no orders: now we wait."

5. Chapter 5

David was rocketed out of his sleep by an urgent, blaring warning sound and red lights. _Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep!_ He jumped out of bed, already knowing what it was, without thinking. Combat Alert Alpha. Covenant were nearby, somewhere. The other pilots were already up and struggling into their flight suits. Nitoka was up and ready, and urging the other pilots to move faster.

"Faster, this isn't a drill! Pasley, hurry up we gotta get down to the launch bay now!" David grabbed his jumpsuit and got into it as fast as he could, tremblingly grabbing for his flight helmet and scattering everything on the table where it sat. He stood up and realized his holster was empty.

"Where's my pistol!" he spat, searching frantically. "I lost my pistol!"

"Too late for that, you won't be using it anyway! Come on, move!" Nitoka said, and pushed David out the door and to the elevator. All of the pilots got in and someone punched the button for the launch bay. The elevator lurched sickeningly and shot downward. They heard the AI over the com channels as the walls flew by them: All combat personnel report to your actions stations. External combat with Covenant immanent. David tried to keep his hands from shaking.

Nitoka addressed them: "All right, boys and girls, here's where we earn our wings. When we get to the launch bay, I want all of you in your interceptors and executing pre-flight checks. Be ready to go when the order comes down, okay?" They acknowledged the order with a salute, and the elevator announced they had arrived with a buzz.

"Let's move!" Nitoka ordered. They moved from the elevator to the platform and quickly slid down ladders onto the launch floor. David sprinted to his Longsword and ran up the ramp into the back, hitting the button to close the hatch. It hissed shut behind him and he jumped into his flight chair. He immediately felt more at ease, with the Longsword at his fingertips. David slid the visor on his helmet down over his eyes, and touched a few controls. A schematic of the interceptor came up in front of his eyes, and arrows moved down the ship, indicating systems. They all showed green.

The com channel came on again, it sounded through the speakers in David's helmet: All personnel, we are leaving dock in thirty seconds. Make sure all airlocks are secured. Pilots, be ready to deploy in forty-five seconds. Engage Covenant fighters on sight. Good luck. Nitoka came on the squadron channel: "You heard that, people, be ready to go. In numerical order, A1 first. We'll decide on a tactic when we find out what's going on."

The ship shook almost imperceptibly. They were leaving dock. The gravity of the situation dawned on David. If they weren't able to take down the Covenant . . . every person on September Station would die. He watched the crewmen leave the launch bay and the airlock doors open into space. The farthest ends of the Station rushed past the opening and disappeared. The first of the Longwords powered out of the bay. David waited his turn and gunned the interceptor's thrusters, rocketing him back into his seat and pushing the Longsword out into space.

The view was magnificent and soothing, with distant nebulae spinning slowly and stars winking at him. There wasn't time to pay attention to it, however. David turned his head and looked toward the Covenant vessels, coming closer by the second. There were three of them, two frigate-sized vessels and a destroyer. Three Covenant ships against two UNSC vessels. The odds weren't good.

The Longswords of A Squadron rose up, and flew parallel to the Orion, which steamed toward the approaching Covenant ships. They hovered in space, seemingly not moving. Their inaction, however, didn't seem like an advantage.

"What're they doin', Lieutenant?" someone asked Nitoka, nervously.

"I don't know, but it's not good," she responded cryptically.

They watched the Covenant vessels float. Their flanks glowed with plasma, and David realized that all of this was very real. One good plasma bolt would turn him and his interceptor into so much floating debris. Yet, the enemy waited, without firing. They stared, waiting tensely. They watched as a white-hot projectile flew from the Orion. It was the ship's Magnetic Acceleration Cannon, which flung super-dense tungsten round at the enemy. The Covenant, far away, easily dodged the round.

A channel came on from the Orion: A and B Squadrons, be aware we have detected inbound bogeys. Boarding craft. You are ordered to intercept and destroy. Red triangles flicked onto David's HUD, denoting boarders. The Covenant's objective became all too clear. They were going to board the station.

"A Squadron, prepare for combat, remove safeties on all weapons. We gotta destroy those boarding craft, people. If just one of them gets to the station or the Winter Moon, our boys are gonna get hell. Form into two Vs, I'll head one, Wingman Hennet will head the other. Let's go, full burn!" They had done this maneuver before in practice, a two-pronged attack. David took his spot at the back of Hennet's V and shoved the thrusters to the redline. The Longsword wings blasted forward toward the boarding craft.

David watched the Covenant ships closely, but still they made no move. I don't like this, he thought. The small, barrel-like boarding craft must have seen them, but they didn't try to evade them. They simply kept flying. The wing lined up toward the small craft and Hennet ordered: "Strafe them with chainguns, ready . . . fire!" David already had a shot; he held the trigger for the 40mm, and a string of massive armor-piercing rounds pelted the enemy ships. They shuddered under the barrage of fire. The wing pulled up and away for another run, and Nitoka's wing swooped down and finished off the ships. They hadn't made a move to resist.

"They didn't even try to dodge! Not so smart, are they!" someone said.

"No, they're clever," Hennet said, "very clever. Something's wrong here, it was too easy." Hennet checked something. "I'm not detecting any life from those boarding craft. Those were decoys! Stay sharp, people. Be on the lookout for anything."

David glanced toward the Covenant vessels as the Orion fired again, and the Covenant nimbly dodged the shot, but did nothing else. They continued to hover in place. David watched them a moment more. Suddenly one of them was wreathed in an electric blue and winked out of view.

"What was that!" David yelled, startled. "One of them just

disappeared!"

"Oh, damn!" Hennet cursed. "I've heard about this. They can make really short jumps through Slipspace. Watch around, that ship'll turn up somewhere real soon!"

David turned his Longsword, facing September Station and the Orion. The space between the ship and the station shimmered, and a large, purplish shape appeared. Oddly, there were no lights on in the Covenant ship, and it wasn't moving. Even the engines, facing them, were dead.

The Orion's AI spoke to them, sounding strangely calm amidst the turmoil: All interceptors return immediately and engage Covenant vessel aft of Orion.

"Wing, fire Pike cluster bombs at the engines!" Hennet ordered. The Covenant ship began to light up, and the red glow rose along it's flanks. A firing solution appeared at the bottom of David's view and he tapped the firing control. A swarm of rocket-propelled bombs shrieked toward the Covenant frigate, splitting into a cloud of small, destructive High Explosive warheads. Headed straight for the enemy's engines.

"Hahaha! That's got them! One alien ship down!" a female pilot remarked triumphantly. But the frigate continued powering up and a translucent, silvery shield materialized around it. The cluster bombs rocketed toward their target and crashed against the shield. They detonated on impact. Explosions ripped through space near David, but as the dust cleared the only thing remaining was the Covenant ship, still fully intact and turning to bring it's plasma to bear against the Orion.

David could hear the awe in Hennet's voice as he spoke: "We are in for a hell of a fight."

6. Chapter 6

Schneider carefully lined up the cue, looking down it at the cue ball and, just beyond it, the eight ball. Jonathan Pasley stood nearby, watching intently, and Pearce sat on a chair close to the pool table. Schneider looked up for a moment to address Pasley.

"This is it. This last shot will seal my victory," he pointed the cue at Jonathan, "and make you the loser!" He laughed and lazily took his time on the shot.

"Go on and miss already, then it'll be my turn!" Jonathan shot back at him. Schneider exaggeratedly aimed a few seconds longer and pulled the cue back for the shot. BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP! Schneider started at the noise and his shot went wild, knocking the cue ball into a pocket.

"Damn it!" he shouted, frowning as Jonathan laughed. He looked around, annoyed. "What is that noise, anyway!"

Pearce stepped up, moving cautiously while he listened. "I think I know what that is. That's a Combat Alert!" The sound got louder, and small, spinning emergency lights on the walls began to light

up.

"Maybe it's a drill," Schneider rationalized, as his face took on an eerie red tint from the emergency lighting. Crewman ran through the halls outside.

"This is no drill!" a crewman informed them. "The ships are pulling out! We got Covenant comin' in, soldiers! You need to get yourselves armed and down to defensive stations!" With that, he sprinted out the door.

"Oh, no they're leaving! They don't know we're not on the _Winter Moon_!" Pearce realized.

"Let's get down there, fast!" Jonathan ordered, already running out the door, "Come on, run!" Schneider and Pearce quickly followed, and they sprinted down the halls. The buzzing emergency tones rang urgently in their ears as they shoved their way through the corridor. They ran out into a hallway that served as a road. Jonathan was on it before he realized what it was. He turned and saw a cargo tram bearing down on him. _Oh damn!_ he thought, and reflex made him jump out of the way with all the strength his legs could muster. The tram missed him--by little more than an inch--and screeched to a halt. He landed on the floor, winded.

"What the _living_ _hell_ do you think you're doing, moron! I could've killed you! What's your name soldier, you can be sure I'm gonna report this to--hey!" the driver of the tram yelled in surprise as Pearce pushed him off. He sprawled on the floor.

"Sorry, but we hafta borrow this!" Jonathan and Schneider leapt onto the tram as Pearce stomped the accelerator. "You'll get it back!" Pearce called over his shoulder, as the tram driver pointed at them and cursed violently.

Riding on the quick little tram, they made much better time, flying down the corridor toward Bay 7, where the _Winter Moon_ was docked. They passed a dock schedule, and Jonathan looked for his watch, but it wasn't there.

"How long until the _Moon_ pulls out!" Jonathan yelled over the buzzy noise of the tram.

"I don't know!" Schnieder shouted, looking at the Pearce, who threw the tram roughly around a cluster of barrels. Schneider snarled at Pearce, "Let me drive!" He grabbed the wheel, but Pearce pushed him off.

"No! I'm driving!" Pearce shouted back.

"You're gonna crash and get us killed!" Schneider accused, fighting him for the wheel. They scuffled, and the tram bobbed and weaved as deck crew scrambled to get out of their way. They crashed through a pile of boxes. Jonathan removed a box from his head; he tried to see past Pearce and Schneider, and spotted the junction to Bay 7.

"Heads up! We gotta turn!" he yelled at them. The two scuffled even more furiously. Hesitating a moment, Jonathan swept his leg underneath them and pushed them over with his left arm, reaching for the steering wheel with the other. He grabbed the wheel and jerked it

sideways. The tires screeched and the tram slid into a sideways spin, toward the wall. Pearce and Schneider looked up in time to see the impending collision, and screamed: "Ahhhhhh!"

Jonathan thought they would crash, knew they would crash, didn't even have time to scream, but he had done things like this in training, and those instincts took over. His foot automatically lifted off the accelerator and his hands slid the wheel the other way, countersteering. The wheels regained traction and screeched louder, he could feel the tram's weight shift in his stomach and it tipped onto two wheels. Luck held out however, and they didn't roll. Instead, they slid loudly onto course heading toward Bay 7.

"Why didn't you tell us you could drive like that!" Schneider yelled at him.

"The opportunity never came up!" Jonathan quipped, concentrating on directing the tram. Ahead, the wide tunnel opened into an even wider chamber: the docking bay.

"There it is!" Schneider said, standing up and pointing. "We're gonna make it!" He looked happily at Pearce, who was staring out the window into space. "No, we're not," Pearce whispered.

"What!" Schneider asked, but Pearce only pointed out through the windows into space. The Winter Moon was blocking much of the view, but not enough to prevent them from seeing the Orion turning furiously. They saw something else, too. Small, bluish points of light began appearing and melted together, and where there had been nothing a massive, predatory shape appeared. It glinted purple. A Covenant ship. Jonathan watched, too, mouth open, as the Covenant ship spun to meet the Orion and its side's glowed red. Schneider snapped him out of his daze.

"We can still make it! Drive!" he yelled. He stepped on Jonathan's foot and the tram leapt forward again. Schneider looked out the window, seeing the Winter Moon. It began to move, and the connections leading to the ship began to burst off with a rush of atmosphere. "They're blowing the connections! Go for that one!" He pointed at the closest portal. Jonathan steered into it and plastered the accelerator to the floor.

"Are you insane? We should stay on the Station!" Pearce yelled at them.

"No!" Schneider burst at him. "They need us on the ship!" The tunnel walls flew by.

"Come on, more speed!" Jonathan urged the tram.

The end of the tunnel was in sight, they were closing fast when they suddenly rose into the air.

The artificial gravity had been cut off.

The tram began to spin in midair, rolling, as the doors at the end began to close, slowly. They clutched at the tram, trying to hold on, but it hit a crate and they were bucked off, sending them flying away on their own. This time, they all screamed. They went hurtling at fifty kph down the corridor and zipped neatly through the

slowly-shutting doors. As soon as they got to the ship, however, the _Winter Moon_'s gravity took over and they fell to the floor, and rolled hard. Jonathan hit something; his head seared and his vision blurred into a hazy red. _We made it_, he thought, and then he fell into unconsciousness.

7. Chapter 7

"Forget the frigate, we aren't gonna hurt it! Break and engage fighters and dropships!" Hennet ordered through the flight channel. "Repeat, break and engage!" David watched as Hennet pulled away from the V and flew after one of the fighters emerging from the Covenant frigate. The rest of them scattered, and David went banking toward the frigate. He shifted his HUD and put small PIP images of his aft, port and starboard cameras at the side of his view, so he could watch his own back. His targeting computer scanned the battlefield and put small red triangles on all the Seraphs. He picked the closest to him and swooped downward, putting his finger on the 40mm trigger.

He followed the Seraph as it dipped near the _Orion_, and David took a glance at it. The _Orion_ was completing it's turn but the Covenant frigate was faster, and it pointed toward the destroyer as it finished charging it's plasma weapon. David watched this, knowing it spelled doom for the _Orion_, but he couldn't do anything about it. As the burning plasma torpedo fired the frigate suddenly bucked wildly sideways, shields flaring and dying. The shot went way off. Stunned, David looked for a cause and saw the _Winter Moon_ tearing free of her moorings, readying another MAC round as she sent hundreds of Archer missiles at the frigate. They blew craters in the frigate's hull, and the _Orion_ faced the Covenant frigate and fired Archers, too. The frigate was ripped into pieces by the powerful HE missiles and secondary explosions wracking it's hull. In seconds it was so much drifting junk.

David only then heard the chatter over the com channels from his wingmates. He realized he was staring at the capital ship battle instead of _his_ fight; he had lost the Seraph he'd been trailing. He scanned his view and saw one tailing a Longsword, harassing it with strange, blue-white lasers.

"Somebody get this bastard off my tail!" the pilot yelled.

"Help's on the way," David assured him, pulling up to track the Seraph. He lined up the targeter with the teardrop shape and got a missile lock. In training it had taken one direct hit to disarm their shields. He armed three Argent S missiles. "Missiles away!" he said. The Argents shot away through space, but as soon as they got near the Seraph, it rolled out of the way. One Argent turned to follow it but the other two detonated in space. The Seraph took a glancing impact from the last Argent, but its shields stayed up.

"Damn, they're fast!" Nitoka exclaimed, engaging a different fighter. "They're dodging the seekers a lot, I'm gonna try the Cobras." David looked the firing controls and remembered about the Cobra II rockets. They weren't terribly powerful but they could be fired _en masse_ at a single target. Perfect. _If_ he could get close enough.

He picked the same Seraph and sped toward it, firing chainguns. It shot upwards, shield flaring. He followed, and it moved into a

banking half-loop. He felt like he was training with Nitoka again; this pilot was good. He duplicated the maneuver, with some trouble, and waited for the Seraph's next move. It hesitated, only for a moment, to fire at a Longsword. David seized the opportunity and punched the afterburners, holding down the trigger to launch the Cobra rockets. He blew toward the Seraph, firing rocket after rocket. They blared out, lightning-quick, and exploded like a string of firecrackers. David kept the trigger held until the Seraph blew into bits. The whole maneuver had lasted about three seconds.

"Yeah! I got one!" David cheered, but his face fell when he heard a beeper go off in his helmet. The aft proximity warning. There was one behind him. Just like in training. And in training, he had died here.

"Pasley you got one on your tail! Evade! Evade!" Nitoka commanded. David barely heard her. He felt the events around him slow down. He felt as if he was outside himself for a moment, no longer in command of his limbs, just watching. On it's own, his hand touched the thrusters, pushing the engine to critical levels and venting it's output through attitude thrusters on the front and side of the Longsword.

At the same time, his other hand balled into a fist and smashed the emergency thruster controls. The emergency thrusters were small chemical tanks, and when the chemicals mixed it caused a violent explosion, blasting his ship onto a new course. A blast went off below and to the left of him, and the world was thrown sideways. His ship flung itself down and sideways, and his head hurt like an egg in a vice. The G's were incredible even as far from a planet as he was, and he couldn't move, he could only feel triumphant when he saw the blue-white laser blast go past him into space.

David was stunned, and he couldn't have fought the Seraph off if he had wanted to. His wingmates--the ones left--came to his rescue and engaged the Seraph. Under fire from four 40mm cannons, it's shield burned for a moment and died, and the 40mm rounds filled the Seraph with holes from nose to tail. It bulged weirdly as its reactor overloaded and it exploded.

David only sat, puzzled that he still lived. His gut wrenched and he thought he would throw up, but he subdued it. His head ached. An insistent beeping annoyed him. He let it beep.

"Pasley, are you all right?" Nitoka asked. She waited a moment. David sat. "Are you all right!" she got louder, more commanding. "Answer me, Lieutenant! Are you alive!"

David finally spoke. "I'm fine, I think." He didn't move, kept staring at the stars.

"Thank God! I was beginning to think you were dead!" she responded.

"I'm wondering how I'm not," David said, looking into space. Finally he snapped out of it. He moved his hand to a button and the beeping stopped. A schematic of the interceptor came up in front of his eyes. The engine and frame flashed red. Apparently he had been hit, a little. "That was close. I'm okay, but the Longsword's not so well. The frame's stressed, and my reactor's damaged. What should I do,

Lieutenant?"

Nitoka didn't have time to answer, because one of the wings spoke, "Lieutenant, look alive we got more action coming our way!" All eyes went to the capital ships battling. The Covenant, the frigate and destroyer left, were approaching quickly and almost at the Station. David looked to the Orion. She had been hit, a large hole was burned in her port side. The metal was white-hot. Apparently she could still fight, though, as she launched twin MAC rounds at the Covenant frigate. The Winter Moon, seemingly undamaged, fired her MAC also. Of the trio of rounds, two struck the frigate, the first set it's shields blazing, the second shorted them out and punched a crater in her prow. Atmosphere vented out of the hole, sending the frigate into a lazy spin. The destroyer came on, returning fire with a plasma torpedo. The torpedo rushed toward the Winter Moon but at the last second she jumped upwards with a bang. The torpedo curved upwards to strike at the frigate, but barely missed.

"They used their emergency thrusters. Clever move," a pilot remarked. The plasma torpedo continued past the Winter Moon and began to turn back but went into the atmosphere of the nearby planet, Girandihar II, and soon dissipated. As this happened, the Covenant frigate righted herself and her flanks began to glow. The Orion sent two more heavy MAC rounds her way with resounding thumps, and this time the frigate tried to dodge, but one MAC round struck and hurt the already weakened ship. The sheer force of the impact ripped a hole clean through it, and smaller explosions dotted all around the hull. It listed to the side, floating.

"Yeah, they got another! We might even win this one!" the same pilot burst out. The Winter Moon readied another shot and fired a MAC round at the only Covenant vessel remaining, the destroyer. As the round shot toward it, however, it dodged nimbly and sped up, moving toward the UNSC vessels at top speed and loosing a plasma torpedo.

"What are they doing?" Nitoka wondered. "We'll just hit them easier if they're closer." The torpedo streaked toward the UNSC ships, a smear of blue-green light, and this time neither vessel moved. The shot was aimed at the Station. It splashed heat across the repair docks, burning much of one section away. The Covenant destroyer accelerated even more and was wreathed in electric blue light, and disappeared. The Covenant's intent became all too clear. They were making a last effort to destroy the station.

Blue motes of light appeared and collected right between the Orion and the Winter Moon. They converged into a bluish shaped and the huge, purple Covenant destroyer materialized. Like the last Covenant ship to try this maneuver, though, this one was dead in space for a moment. The UNSC ships took advantage of the time. The Winter Moon thrust upward into space and launched her remaining Archers, while the Orion moved to get between the enemy frigate and the Station.

The rest of David's wing rushed toward the enemy ship, hoping to help. David couldn't hope to be of much help with a damaged reactor. He pushed his engines to 20 and faced the Covenant ship, firing his 40mm at it in frustration.

The Covenant ship began to gain power back, and it's shields

enveloped it before the Archer missiles hit. They impacted on the shield, which easily absorbed the explosions. Blue pinpoints of light appeared all over the hull, and blue-white lasers fired at the two UNSC vessels. Pulse lasers. Where they struck, small splashing explosions scorched and burned away some of the hulls of the ships.

The large, red glow built up along the destroyer's side with startling speed and it launched a boiling plasma torpedo at the Station. It impacted with the control section and much of it was melted by the immense heat. David wondered how many had just been burned to ash in the space of a second.

The Orion, seeing it had failed to block the shot, fired it's two MAC cannons on the destroyer. At point-blank range the tungsten MAC rounds would be terribly powerful, but the shield deflected one and all but stopped the other. It dug a small hole in the side of the destroyer, which turned to face the Winter Moon, firing more pulse lasers. The Winter Moon, however, seemed to anticipate this and blasted the destroyer full on with a MAC round. It punched a hole through most of the Covenant vessel, from nose to tail.

David was sure the destroyer was dead, but it kept up a barrage of lasers on the Winter Moon. The deadly charge built up again along it's sides, flowing, almost a liquid. If it fired a plasma shot straight into the Winter Moon, the crew of the Moon would not be likely to survive it.

The Orion came to the rescue, firing the rest of her Archers and putting two MAC rounds straight into the destroyer, shorting it's regenerating shields and putting a hole through it's midline. The Archers slammed into the destroyer, blasting small pocks into her hull and rushing into the hole to explode inside. Still the Covenant ship survived. The Orion accelerated quickly toward the Covenant ship, pouring all it's energy into speeding forward. She impacted with the destroyer right at the gaping hole, where it's hull was weakest. The destroyer was shorn in two, and it's ends went floating into space, still attacking the UNSC ships with pulse lasers. It shot out it's plasma torpedo, which carved a ragged arc, winging toward the UNSC vessels. The Winter Moon finally recharged her MAC and fired a round straight into the spinning front half of the enemy ship, blowing it to bits. The plasma dissipated in space.

David let out a breath, not realizing he'd been holding it. Who would have thought it? Two UNSC ships beat three Covenant ones. They had been very lucky. Lucky or not, though, victory was theirs. A ragged, bloody victory but a victory nonetheless.

Some time later David was able to cruise into the launch bay on the Orion, leaking coolant the whole way. The beaten Longsword was in sad shape, and not just from David's maneuver.

"Looks like you took a hit or two, sir," a mechanic told David as he stumbled down the entry ramp at the back. The mechanic pointed to three large pocks on the hull, which looked somewhere between melted and scorched. David was too exhausted to care. He somehow made it to the elevator where Nitoka spoke to the pilots:

"Pilots, we did good today. Though we lost some comrades," she sighed, "some friends, in the battle, their lives were not wasted.

Our actions helped save millions of people, those on the station and those civilians on Girandihar II. We all performed well, especially the new men and women, and I'm proud of you. Now let's go get some sleep." They all shuffled to the elevator. David was asleep on his feet, snoring, before it reached their rooms.

8. Chapter 8

"Okay, Pasley, hand me the mesh cable, alright?" Lieutenant Scalia ordered Jonathan. Pasley walked over to a cart covered in parts and rustled them around a moment, finally coming up with a long tube. He'd been working in the repair bay for a little while now, long enough to get to know the two men he was working with now, Lt. Scalia and Crpl. Knight. By Jonathan's reckoning, they were both grizzled vets but they enjoyed every moment, in their own way. This usually implied some complaining.

"This one, sir?" Jonathan asked, dangling the cord in the air.

"Yeah, that's the one. And I told you already to stop calling me sir!" he barked, "Call me Jas."

"Why Jas?" Jonathan asked, passing the cable to him.

"Cause by the time you finish saying, 'Watch out Giovanni!' I'll be roastin' in hell!" Jas said, grinning. He inspected the cable and handed it to the resident mechanic, Corporal Knight, who turned to the Cuatro truck sitting on the hydraulic lift near them. He began to move toward the Cuatro's open access hatch but stopped and looked at Pasley.

"Are you watching, Pasley? If you're gonna be any use around here, you better learn some mechanical skills." Jonathan nodded his assurance that he was watching as Knight ducked his head into the Cuatro. "And you better be of some use or I'll get Top to post you on waste disposal," he said, only half-joking. Of all the jobs on the ship, waste disposal was the most hated. Mostly because it involved cleaning the ever-clogged waste disposal units a.k.a. toilets.

Scalia laughed, putting his hands on his hips and stretching. "Knight, I know Top better than you do, and I also know you can't get him to do shit he don't want to. Damn stubborn, them Brits." Knight simply grinned a bit, amused and annoyed at the same time. He resumed connecting the cables.

Finally he stood up and wiped his hands on his greasy coverall. "Well, that's got it. With that new battery cable in, this Cuatro should be set for at least six months."

"Yeah, these things are tough as nails," Jonathan pointed out.

"Ah, but you don't know just how tough, greenie." Scalia settled into a storytelling voice as they finished up work on the Cuatro. "I don't drive 'em, but I fly 'em down to you dogfaces. I've had one dangling under my Pelican and I took a hit from Covenant artillery. Part of my wing was blown off and one of the cables holding the Warthog on was melted. The other cables snapped and it fell a hundred

feet to the ground. The infantry down below radioed up later that they found a Warthog dug into the ground, with it's outer skin half melted off. One of the Marines got in, punched the engines, and she started right up. That's tough for ya." They all gathered their things and began walking to the bunkrooms.

"I hear you. And man, those chainguns are amazing," Knight said.

"Those're the 14.5mm ones, right?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah, that's some nice artillery there," Scalia responded. "Good weapon, I'm told."

"Speaking of weapons, why aren't you armed, Pasley?" Knight asked. Jonathan suddenly realized his lack of firepower and noticed the M6D pistols both Scalia and Knight had.

"Yeah, you're on duty then you gotta have a gun. This is a combat zone, boy!" Scalia said jokingly. He pulled his M6D from his chest holster and displayed it.

"Well," Jonathan started, "I haven't been issued anything yet. We had that firing drill yesterday."

"You mean test," Knight stated.

"No, I meant drill," Jonathan responded.

"Didn't you know? It's that drill helps them decide what you get issued." Knight told him. Jonathan looked at him a minute and shook his head.

"I _didn't_ know, but I hope that means I'll get a rifle," Jonathan told them, smiling and rubbing his hands at the thought. They continued toward the elevator to the bunkrooms; they had almost reached it when the ship intercom came on: _All new Marine recruits are to report to the armory at 1830 hours to receive their equipment._

"Well, that's convenient," Scalia observed. He looked at his timepiece. "Uh-oh greenie, it's 1823 hours now. Better get down there quick!"

"Ah hell, it's 1823 already? See ya'll later I better get moving!" Jonathan waved a quick goodbye and jogged off.

"Run greenie run!" they called after him, chuckling. They wouldn't see him again before the Battle of Reach, and Marines didn't tend to fare well in battles.

9. Chapter 9

The greenhorn Marines straggled out of the armory in small groups, heading to their bunkrooms. It had been a long day. After receiving briefs on all standard weapons and equipment, and their proper use, they were fidgety. After being issued with these things, they were tiring. By the time the officers were done giving them a long-winded speech, they were half-asleep. For troops so accustomed to physical

activity, sitting still was irritating, and the assault of numerous speeches made them weary of mind as well. So the officers had sent them on their way to the bunkrooms for some much-needed sleep.

A few minutes later the men of the 25th Tactical were ready to rest, hastily taking off armor and stowing weapons, throwing themselves down on their bunks. Jonathan did the same. He removed most of his armor plates, and unshouldered his rifle, setting it on the bunk. Then with a sigh he let himself fall into the bunk and closed his eyes.

The lights were already dimmed and the room fairly quiet. Yet Jonathan found himself unable to sleep. He opened his eyes, and looked around the room. A few of the greenies were already asleep, some snoring loudly. Yet this didn't keep Jonathan awake. It was something else. A vague uneasiness maybe. His heart was beating a little faster than usual, and stayed at that pace.

He sat up, shifted his eyes to the vets. He was amazed at their ability to sleep with armor on. Yet somehow they did. One of them was facing him, even as Jonathan watched him. He envied the man.

"Whassamatta greenie? Can't sleep?" Startled, Jonathan realized it was the vet who was talking to him. The man opened his eyes but made no other movement, waiting for an answer.

"Uh...yeah," Jonathan said.

"Why not?" the veteran asked, looking him in the face.

"I dunno, I just feel uneasy."

"That's fear," the vet told him.

"I guess you're right," Pasley responded, hanging his head a little.

"Hey, it's nothing to be ashamed of," the vet informed him, perfectly serious. "A little fear is a good thing, keeps ya on your toes. The trick is not to let it get out of hand. You don't want fear to stop you in the middle of combat. That's what gets you killed."

"How do you control it?"

"Most of the time you don't need to. You get into a fighting mindset, and you're more focused, more aware. But whenever I got too afraid, I always thought about what I was fighting for,"

"What's that?"

"Well, in the broad sense, all of humanity. But for me, it's my Molly. She's my wife. And when all this is done, I'm going back to her. What about you? What're you going back to?"

"Uhh ... hmm," Jonathan thought a moment. He'd never had a serious girlfriend or anything like that. "My friends," he said.

The vet smiled a little. "That'll do. That'll do fine," he said. "Go to sleep, greenie."

He closed his eyes and lay back on the bunk. He thought about his family back home, and his comrades on the _Winter Moon_. And he fell asleep.

10. Chapter 10

Commander Ward strode the deck with a heavy step, reviewing the crewmen. Though shorter than almost all of his deck officers, he still possessed a presence that made him seem far larger. Deck officers scurried out of his way as he stomped along. Cmdr. Ward was notorious for quick-changing moods and high spirits. His buccaneer manner had earned him the nickname Blackbeard, though no one said it to his face. He was the highest-ranking officer aboard the _Winter Moon_, a clever ship captain who'd seen action at Sigma Octanus and managed to survive. He'd been one of the lucky ones.

Cmdr. Ward shook his head to clear it. Now was not the time to reminisce. He found that his hand had strayed to the sword attached to his belt. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, passed down in his family from all the way back to the Third World War. He drew his hand back. His hand always crept to that sword whenever he was nervous or worried. Just like he was now.

Having survived a major battle (and a few skirmishes), Ward knew that the Covenant rarely left anything half-done. And they sure hadn't finished in their attack on _September_ Station. Ward knew they'd be back, and possibly soon. Every hour they needed for repairs was another hour in which the Covenant might reappear. So far it had been seventeen hours since the battle, and none of them knew how much longer they would need to be in dock.

The Station had docked the _Winter Moon_ in the best repair dock on the installation, and even with the command section of the station gone the techs were working efficiently around the clock to fix the cruiser. Nevertheless, this did little to allay Commander Ward's fears. He looked at his timepiece: thirty seconds had passed. He took it off and put it in his pocket; it would be better not to know the time.

"Sir!" Ward started and turned to see a crewman standing attention. His face was pale, and he was breathing quickly. "Sorry, sir but we've got a message from FLEETCOM HQ! It's urgent, sir!"

"Show me, Lieutenant," Ward commanded. "Put it on the main screen." Ward only read a moment before he burst out, "Oh God in heaven . . ." Crewmen looked over and gasps were heard around the room. The message read thus:

**United Nations Space Command ALPHA PRIORITY TRANSMISSION
04592Z-83**

Encryption Code: Red

Public Key: file /bravo-tango-beta-five/

From: Admiral Roland Freemont, Commanding Fleet Officer, FLEETCOM Sector One Commander/

****To:**** ALL UNSC warships in REACH, JERICO and TANTALUS systems

****Subject:**** Immediate Recall

****Classification:**** Classified (BGX directive)

/start file/

Covenant presence detected on REACH system's edge coordinates 030 relative.

All UNSC warships are hereby ordered to cease all activities and regroup at rally point ****ZULU**** at best speed.

****ALL SHIPS**** are to enact the Cole Protocol immediately.

/end file/

Ward suddenly realized why the Covenant had not pressed their attack against the station. They were grouping, preparing for a different strike. On Reach. Reach, which was humanity's biggest military outpost and shipyard. Against the Covenant, current estimates had humanity holding out a month, maybe two. If Reach fell, those estimates shrunk to about a week. Ward stared at the screen for a moment, hunched over and disbelieving, and finally lifted his hand and pointed to his deck officers.

"Enact the Cole Protocol," he croaked at them almost inaudibly.

"Pardon, sir?" one asked. Ward sat for a second, then rose to his full height and stared them down. The empty void in his stomach grew to a fiery boiling. His spirit began to return.

"The Cole Protocol dammit!" he thundered at them. He turned to his ops officer, and yelled at him. "Schroeder! What's the status on our repairs?"

Schroeder felt heartened by Ward's fiery combat demeanor, and answered back confidently, "Ninety-five percent complete, sir! All systems online and ready!" Hearing this Ward put on a ferocious grin and stomped up and down the bridge, yelling commands. Now that there were things to be done, Ward felt much better. The pit in his stomach was growing quickly, but the need for action overshadowed and enveloped it. He didn't play the waiting game well, but when there was a fight to be had he didn't falter.

"Blow all connections to the Station! Plot the fastest course to Reach, best possible speed! Ricker, move us into Slip-space as soon as we're clear of _September_! Myra, contact the _Orion_ and tell them to follow our lead!" Ward yelled. He laughed crazily. "Hold your heads high people!" He drew his sword and held it aloft, watching it shine. "There's battle to be done!"

11. Chapter 11

"Attention, soldiers!" The PA blared over the ships comms, waking those who slumbered and annoying those who were still up. "Prepare

for slipstream jump and eminent assault of Covenant vessels. Engineers have exactly 15 minutes to complete repairs and disconnect the ship." Jonathan shot out of his vessel and looked around, his eyes adjusting to the light. The other soldiers did likewise, jumping into combat armor. He looked at the vet he had spoken to earlier. He was tightening his chest plates into position.

"What's going on?" Jonathan asked nervously. The vet looked up at him.

"War. They've either found Earth or Reach or somewhere. Either way, it's bad. Get ready, boy, we gotta fight soon." He answered while getting ready. Jonathan leaped out of bed and grabbed his gear. He strapped his armor on knowing that he would see combat, and prayed that it wouldn't be his last time.

David Pasley had heard the alarms as well, and was already donning his flightsuit. Nitoka burst into the room, sweating and panting. She began shouting at the half-prepared pilots to get ready for more combat. David could hardly believe it. They had just come out of combat, after all. She ran over to her bunk and grabbed her pistol.

"Lieutenant! What's going on?" David shouted over. He didn't even look as she answered. She strapped her boots on and answered him simply.

"They found Reach."

"Commander Ward! We exit slipstream in three minutes. Reports from the Euclid say they're bringing more ships in, looks like two destroyers. Reach informs us that nearly the entire UNSC fleet is there fighting more Covenant ships than they can count." A deck hand shouted. Ward strode the deck, his sword brandishing. He was a brilliant tactician and fearless captain, but even he knew this battle wouldn't end in victory. His breathing grew heavier as he paced back and forth.

"Schroeder!" Ward shouted. Lt. Schroeder stood to attention, jumping out of his computer terminal.

"Sir!" He answered. Ward walked over to his terminal, prompting Schroeder to sit and continue his work.

"Son, I'm about to order you to do everything to kill yourself except pull the trigger. Do you understand?" Ward calmly asked. Schroeder continued working as if he hadn't heard, then suddenly spoke up.

"Sir, I believe I speak for everyone in the human race when I say we are behind you 110. Order me as you will, sir." Schroeder proudly answered. Ward smiled and set his hand on Schroeder's shoulder.

"Then here's the plan," Ward explained.

The two ships rocketed towards Reach at blistering speeds, but one had a plan.

"Alright, Marines! ASSEMBLE!" Lewis shouted. The 25th Tactical

snapped to attention and formed two neat lines facing each other as Lewis walked between them. "We exit slipstream in a few minutes and will be immediately going topside. Now's the time where you're toldâ€ they've found Reach. Every Covenant ship we've known about is there and twice as many we didn't. We're gonna give 'em one hell of a fight, though. Reports say that they've landed on Reach and their infantry is moving out to destroy power so the planetary defense cannons will go offline. It's our job to stop those bastards. Are we ready to give them Hell and Brimstone, Marines!"

"OOH-RAH!" Came the response from the Marines. Lewis nodded in satisfaction.

"Damn straight. Move out to the dropship bays, soldiers." He ordered. The Marines saluted and made their way to the dropships. The Pelicans were waiting for them. Jonathan stood in line, waiting to be assigned a ship to board. One ship filled with Marines, then left. Then another followed it. Finally, it was his turn to board. He sat in the front of the bay as the doors closed behind their group. The forward hatch door opened and he saw a familiar face sitting in the pilot's seat.

"Hey, boys. How're ya doin'?" Jas asked with a grin. The Marines smiled and asked him about the combat. "Whoa, whoa, one at a time, fellas. We leave in one minute, I'll drop you down by the power stations on Reach to defend them. Everything else is up to you."

"What if we get shot down on the way there? Ground fire or something." Jonathan asked nervously. The other Marines leaned in, intent to hear his response. Jas just laughed hard and shook his head.

"Listen here, greenie," Jas began. "I've raided plenty of UNSC junkyards, because I ain't stupid. I know what I'm doing. I've fitted some of those warthog chainguns to the front of this Pelican, and two spankers on the side." JP looked at him confused.

"Spankers?" He asked himself. Another vet leaned in to answer him.

"He means rocket pods. They'll launch two rockets each and blow shit up." The vet helped. JP nodded in approval, but the vet had his own question.

"Hey, Lieutenant!" He called.

"Yep?" Jas called back.

"Those aren't just ordinary spankers, are they?" The vet asked with a laugh. Jas turned back with a grin.

"Depleted uranium rounds. Small nuclear explosions are fun." He answered with a maniacal grin. The Marines sat looking more comfortable, even the greenies. The bay doors in front of the Pelicans opened as they came out of Slipstream.

The sight before them was that of absolute hell. Reach shone below them, flashes of light from explosions flickered across the war-torn plains like cameras from a crowd taking pictures of their nightmares.

Their view was also intruded by intense space combat as they dropped out of the hangar bay. Flashes of fire flew down past them to the planet.

"The hell was that!" One marine shouted. "Are they shooting us?"

"Negative." Jas came back over the intercom to their helmets. "Those are genuine ODS'T's en route to the LZ." JP stared at the fabled Orbital Drop Shock Troops as they plummeted through the atmosphere of the planet. A silent explosion of white light burst forth from the corners of their eyes. They quickly turned and saw a Covenant cruiser meeting its end. The engine bays had exploded from the inside, tearing the ship into several chunks. Cheers came over their helmets communications array as they got closer to the fleet.

"There's one! She was big, wasn't she?" One voice laughed.

"Stay focused, dammit, there's one on your six!" A senior voice commanded.

"Roger that, I am moving in for the kill."

"Give me a firing solution, Schroeder!"

"Sir! Priority alert from ground â€" communications blackout imminent!"

The voices came too fast to decipher the messages anymore. Somewhere, a UNSC ship was ready to unleash its payload while the fighters scrambled to protect them. Jas's rushed voice suddenly came over the intercom.

"Hang tight, boys! We're about to get engaged!"

"Give me a firing solution, Schroeder!" Commander Ward shouted, brandishing his sword high. "There's a troop transport frigate with a giant bulls-eye painted on the side and I'm ready to blow its payload to hell!"

"Roger, sir! Working as fast as I can!" Schroeder replied, panting and covered in sweat. His fingers worked as quickly as his body could support, desperately solving equations and predictability patterns. Finally he found one that worked for him. With a few quick taps, it was uploaded to the ship's AI and the captain. Ward turned to his console and grinned, almost evilly.

"This is incredible Schroeder. You're getting a raise for this; I'll make sure of it." He commented as he activated his com-link to the fighters. "Nitoka, are you there? I have a firing solution you might find particularly wicked."

"I copy that, sir. Let's see it." Nitoka's reply came, sounding relatively calm considering the situation. A few moments later, the channel was flooded with laughter. "Sir, this is genius! You'd better be giving Schroeder a raise for this!"

"That's what I told him!"

"Well then, we're ready when you are. Fighters arm your nukes and

pick the engine bays of different targets. Make sure you pick the biggest ships you can, and aim for the insides. This should be good." Nitoka confirmed with the fighter pilots.

"Good then, Schroeder are we ready?" The Commanders voice boomed. Schroeder pressed a button quickly and gave thumbs up.

"We're good to go, sir."

"Excellent. Fire at will."

12. Chapter 12

As the haze of dust, dirt, and debris slowly lifted, the 25th Tactical readied their weapons and began a quick sweep of the area. The small camp set up was flimsy and ill-protected. A few medical tents surrounded by mounted machine guns and a landing area for transports were all that stood in the way of a Covenant assault group and a city full of evacuating civilians. JP's eyes quickly squinted at a flash of white light in the nearby forest, which was quickly accompanied by a low boom. He saw the Pelican they had just flown in on drop an empty shell, still smoking all the way into the dirt below. Another round entered the chamber as it hovered nearby.

"Wahoo! You sure weren't kidding, sir!" An awestruck marine shouted through his helmet. A crackly laugh came through the static in all of their ears.

"I told you guys. I got your backs till the end. Orders tell me I have to patrol the cities, but I'd much rather make sure you guys have a quick exit when you need it. And nukes, too." Jas replied.

"Sir, what are our orders?" JP quietly asked. The others looked at him with astonishment. The greenie had not only spoken up, he'd asked a very logical question. After all, they really didn't have established objectives. Silence fell over the channel for a brief moment before the familiar voice returned.

"Well, according to my plans, you guys are to move southeast towards the forest. There will be a valley you can travel along about 1 and a half clicks away which should give you defilade from any of their scouts. At the end of a valley there will be a large clearing which I can see from here. There is a Covenant assault team holding a communications tower that will give us a view of their entire troop movement in this hemisphere. Your job is to capture it and hold it at all costs. I'll do my best to clear you a path; just make sure you move fast. Ready?"

"Roger, we'll start moving now!" Their sergeant shouted. "Let's go men! There's killin' to do." JP's heart skipped a beat as his mind entered survival mode. He brought his rifle to his shoulder and took a readied stance. His unit moved quickly and quietly into the forest, passing the wore-out guards manning their guns. With a quick salute, they entered the woods. The familiar chirping of birds and rustling of leaves was replaced by the eerie silence, broken only by the distant sounds of war and the occasional rake of gunfire from the pelican as it mopped up a Covenant scout group.

"Look alive, greenie, we're entering the valley now." A vet whispered to JP as they began a sharp descent into a small valley. JP looked somewhat perplexed at the idea of calling it a valley. To him, it was more like a large ditch. But it didn't matter that much " cover was cover. If it stopped him from dying, he wouldn't care what they called it. There was enough room to hide if they needed, but they weren't interested in hiding. They were quickly moving through the foliage at a grueling pace. At this rate, they'd be in the clearing in moments, firing and receiving fire with Covenant troops.

"Another 5 minutes and you're there. Hang in there guys. You're all clear up until the clearing. I'll try to make you some craters to hide in and mop up whatever I can. I don't have many more nukes on hand, but I got enough bullets to hold 'em all off until you're already taking the tower." Jas shouted over the intercom. JP gripped his rifle tight and ignored his fears and fatigue. The clearing became visible quickly, along with smoking pits of dirt from where the pelican had gave them foxholes. They quickly found themselves diving for cover in the large holes, bringing their weapons up to fire into the opening. There were Covenant grunts everywhere. They were small, awkward-looking midgets standing barely a few feet tall. Yet as small as they seemed, their plasma pistols could cut right through a man in a matter of moments. JP threw himself into a hole and rested his rifle on the ground, lining up his shots. They were outnumbered easily ten to one. He swallowed his fear and squeezed the trigger. Three quick rounds penetrated the helmet of a nearby grunt, releasing the methane gas they thrived off of. With a shrill cry, the grunt fell. Time seemed to freeze. Everything around him became distant, and he focused only on the moment. He had killed one. An enemy soldier had fallen to his hands. This was what he had trained for. This is what he had waited for. Time returned loudly, with a bright flash. Another nuclear round shattered a pair of Covenant tanks that had targeted them. The Pelican hovered overhead like a beacon of safety to the troops. The grunts were dropping like flies, and the Marines seemed unstoppable. JP grinned and line up his next shot.

"I want two Longswords behind me! Pasley, I want you leading the second wing. All ships form attack pattern 7-niner-niner-3." Nikota ordered. David quickly punched the code into his targeting computer and saw the readout below him. Autopilot assisted him into the formation with a slight burst in speed. The two pronged attack completely ignored the two Covenant ships in front of them and continued to the largest ship, the destroyer, in the back.

"Lieutenant, I don't think this will work! What should we do if it doesn't?" A nervous pilot asked. Nikota responded quickly and matter-of-factly.

"Continue the attack until we die or they die. Whichever comes first." David analyzed the attack once again as they swooped past the second ship. Plasma beams fired everywhere, narrowly missing their wing. "Alright, get ready to unleash your payload and make SURE you set your autopilot to follow me and match speed. I don't think any of you are ready to try this on your own. Pasley, is your side ready?"

"Roger that, Lieutenant " all of us are accounted for and ready.

Autopilot has been set." David replied. His wingmen did as he and set their computers to follow Nikota after they'd fired. The destroyer's main plasma cannon charged up with an eerie glow.

"Get ready to fire on my mark!" Nikota shouted. Their fingers sat itchy on the trigger, begging to be scratched. The plasma cannon whirred and began its firing sequence.

"FIRE!" She practically screamed. The pilots did as ordered, and their payloads of missiles and bombs flew directly towards the shields where they would hopefully make an effect. The shield dropped as the cannon turned to fire at the perfectly lined up group of fighters from which the missiles had come. Most of them shattered on the engines of the ship with little effect, but their presence had infuriated the captain. To think that a small wing of fighters had the gall to attack the greatest fighting vessel ever conceived! The plasma round fired towards the single-file line of fighters.

"Lt. Nikota! The plasma round is firing!" A pilot yelled. Nikota was one step ahead of him, her hands deftly working the throttle and the controls.

"Roger! BREAK! Engage afterburners and set vertical angle to 90 degrees!" Nikota ordered. The pilots quickly jammed back on their flight sticks and pressed the little red button on their fighters throttle. Nikota had snuck into David's ship and crudely wrote "GO BABY GO" on his afterburner button. Now, Dave saw why. The sudden acceleration almost knocked him out, his ship shooting straight up like a bullet.

As all the fighters broke from their pattern and avoided the shot, it was only then that the Covenant captain saw his fatal error. The fighters had flown in a straight line directly towards a Covenant troop transport vessel and a medical frigate behind it. The plasma round would easily cut through the troop ship and hopefully be stopped by the medical frigate. The round smashed into the transports shield, rendering it useless. The blast punched a hole through the whole ship, essentially destroying it. The ships communications recorded a brief SOS message as all the Covenant soldiers on board suddenly died. The round continued, however, as the captain looked in dismay. He would surely be executed for his actions. The round punctured the medical frigates shield, and finally entered the ship, where it lost momentum and barely ate through. The captain and his crew were shocked. How could they have made such a mistake? As the dust settled, they looked to see if the frigate would survive. They looked just in time to see a MAC tungsten round from a UNSC destroyer decimate the rest of the vessel. Another round shot straight through the holes in both the ships, rocketing straight for the now-cooling plasma cannon.

"Restore shields!" The captain barked furiously. The crew desperately worked to restore power to the shields from the cannon.

"Sir, we can only restore 25 of the shields until the cannon has fully cooled!" The first-mate cried. The captain looked in horror as the MAC round tore into the plasma cannon. The ship shook as the cannon overloaded with energy and imploded. The resulting explosion from the cannon's destruction was enough to not only completely disintegrate the entire ship, but destroy a small wing of ships that were heading to repair the medical frigate.

Captain Ward rested his hand on Schroeder's shoulder. They both shook almost uncontrollably.

"You don't know how many lives you've saved, Schroeder. You just don't know."

"Thompson! Charles! Move left and flank 'em! There's an outcrop of rocks that should cover you. Put some fire on the big guys so the rest can push through the middle! Pasley, Schneider, Pearce â€" when I give you the go I want you charge straight ahead and get to that tower and do not stop no matter what! The rest of you marines cover them! When they're at the tower I want you going in groups of three!" Jas barked through the radio. His pelican had sustained light damage from ground fire, but he was out of nukes and low on ammo. If he timed this right, they could finish their mission quickly from the safety of the tower. He watched the two marines scramble to the left and dive behind the boulders. Using the opportunity to their advantage, Jas' bullets howled into the shields of the elite troopers. As the shields overheated and dispersed, the rifle rounds from the marines finished the job easily. With that done, they focused on the grunts. Drawing their fire away from the other marines, Jas issued the command.

"GO!" Without wasting a moment, the three bewildered troops sprinted to the open main door of the tower, diving in. JP slid on the ground on his chest plate. His heart was racing. To compound his fear, his eye-piece beeped its familiar warning of nearby enemies. It read a grunt less than a meter away. Without thinking, JP brought up his rifle. A loud bang echoed off of the cold, steel walls. The methane-stained blood smeared on the floor as the grunts lifeless body collapsed. JP had not fired a shot. Pearce stood there defiantly, the barrel of his pistol smoking. The hollow clank of the empty casing hit the ground, and with a quick bounce, settled at his feet.

"That was hardcore." Schneider gasped calmly, picking himself up. JP stood too, and the man that was Justin Pearce lowered his pistol. Now he was a killer, and he couldn't be more proud of himself. With the squeeze of the trigger, he had saved his friends life. They stared at each other briefly, with a silent understanding and thanks of the situation. Soon, three more marines barreled in from the field.

"Excellent work, men! I'm reading less than 10 grunts left on the field, and they're regrouping behind that hill! Finish them off and the tower will be secure. I'm out of ammo, so I'm heading back to the LZ to reload and possibly evacuate some civilians. Will you guys be okay?" The voice that came through was happy, proud, and friendly. Their sergeant confirmed their situation, and Jas was on his way. He knew they'd risked everything for one solitary tower in the middle of nowhere, and they couldn't have done a better job. The last few marines entered the tower and closed up the doors, barricading them with the body of the dead grunt and a few empty supply cases â€" both human and Covenant. A few of the troops head to the top room of the tower to monitor the enemy activity. The room had a large balcony that wrapped around the top, giving them a perfect vantage point of their targets. A few marines entered the dusty communication room just below the top floor and went to work powering up the equipment. The last few stayed near the bottom to guard the doors.

The tower consisted of a large spiral staircase that hugged the walls. It went up 200 feet before the first room, which was mainly a storage room. The floor doubled as a lift and elevator for supplies. Further up the spiral, 50 feet from the storage room, was what appeared to be a bunk room and mess area for the troops stationed there. It comfortably held four men stationed there. Another 50 feet up was the communications room itself. It was smaller, letting the soldier's notice that the tower was getting narrower. Although the tower itself wasn't that wide to begin with, the topmost floors added the fear of claustrophobia. There were very few windows, and when there was one, it was tiny at best. The last 50 feet of stairs led to the observation room and balcony. It was a perfect snipers nest. You could see miles in any direction.

Pasley stood on the balcony, his rifle readied, as he took aim at the last few grunts. They'd begun a slow march towards the tower. He counted seven. He motioned for Schneider and Pearce to join him. They were soon joined by Thompson, a lance corporal in his company. Together, they picked their targets.

"Alright, this should be easy. Shoot as soon as they're at 100 yards from the tower. Aim for below their breathing tubes. Their speed, combined with recoil and distance should land you a direct hit in the face." Thompson instructed. He wasn't a tall man, but his skin was tan. He seemed happy-go-lucky, yet intelligent. A few moments went by. Finally, the relative tranquility of the field was suddenly and briefly pierced by the sound of quick, individual shots. Nine shots later, the seven grunts lay dead. JP and Brandon Thompson shared a quick laugh at the first shots from Mark and Justin. Both shots had missed because they'd fired too early at their targets. Brandon had finished both of their targets off.

"Don't worry guys. I'm not going to bug you about it. You both did well today. The whole team did outstanding considering we only lost a couple of guys. Perhaps what the 25th needed was some new blood after all." Brandon mused with a smirk. The troops stood stoically on the balcony and looked in the distance. To the west, a city was covered in a fog of smoke. Transports were desperately evacuating civilians and dropping marines to stop the Covenant waves. To the east, another city was much in the same situation. Thankfully, both cities were so far away, they were not in direct harm of either. The tower they were in was originally constructed as an emergency relay station in case anything happened to either city. Now, it was the primary communications relay between the northern hemisphere of Reach and the rest of the human race. The sun was setting, and in the darker part of the sky the soldiers could even see their great battleships continuing to engage the mighty vessels of the Covenant. It almost seemed like a dream.

Below them, in the communications room, lance corporal Matthew Charles had finally fixed the short-range radio. Its meager range of 100 miles left them mostly in the dark, but they needed to know what was going on in the cities nearby.

"I got it! Everyone get in here!" Charles shouted. Within moments, every soldier had crowded into the room as Charles activated the radio. They were mortified.

"I've got three Covenant dropships coming down on sector 4! Need

backup!"

"Negative, lieutenant â€" we do not have enough troops! I want you to retreat back to sector 3 and regroup with the 209th!"

"â€| Massive civilian casualties. I'm guessing at least 80..."

"Negative ghost rider, pattern is full! Repeat cross and â€" "

"â€|. BREAK AWAYâ€| UNDER HEAVY FIREâ€|"

"Don'tâ€| don't letâ€| negativeâ€| too manyâ€|"

"We're dying here, where is that backup!"

"â€| Already deadâ€|"

"â€|.Impossibleâ€| artillery requestedâ€| nuclearâ€| authorized for use onâ€| no civilians leftâ€|"

"This is Lt. Giovanni Scalia! I'm hit bad and crash landing in sector 4! Repeat â€" MAYDAY â€" MAYDAY!"

13. Chapter 13

A boot stomped down onto the gravel, still smoldering from the bombing just moments earlier. Master Sergeant Michael Protich stood with his men. They'd been the first to drop into what was designated Reach City 12. It was a big one; millions of civilians had called it home up until a few hours ago. Now, at least 80 were lying dead in the streets and in their homes. Mike looked at his few men, all that was left of the 209th Infantry. Their orders were simple enough. They had to move into sector 4 and retrieve a lieutenant and whatever men he had, then bring them back to sector 3 where they had more control of the situation.

"P-Roach, are you readin' me?" A voice crackled through his headset. It was an old, familiar voice. It was his good friend Amil Abdallah. Lieutenant Abdallah was a flight coordinator. Whenever a ship launched or landed on his ship, he was the one that ordered it. Right now, Amil was coordinating rescue efforts for the troops. Civilian evacuation was no longer an option. If they hadn't made it out of the cities by now, they weren't.

"Good morning, Lieutenant." Mike laughed back.

"I got good news for you and your men." Amil cheerfully announced, ignoring Mike's ever-present sarcasm. Mike motioned for his men to take cover while he spoke.

"What do you got for me, good buddy?"

"A pilot from my ship just crashed in your sector. Find out if he's alive or dead. If he's alive, bring him back."

"I thought you had good news?"

"He crashed about 200 feet ahead of you." Amil answered

matter-of-factly. Mike turned to his men. The twins, Greg and Andrew Hodgdon, were good soldiers. Andrew was a real screw-up, but he had good aim. Greg was the spitting image of the perfect soldier. Strong, fast, smart, and a damned good shot. The only other man he knew was Lance Corporal Greg Horrocks. They called him Hor. He was a friend of theirs since some of the first battles. The other men were either picked up from other units or just greenhorns haphazardly assigned to the 209th. They were nameless, clumsy, and expendable. Every once in a while one of them proved useful and managed to become a real soldier, but many of them became plasma fodder.

"Well? You heard the Lieutenant! We've got a pilot to rescue!" Mike ordered. They began a sprint across the street and against a totally destroyed building. They stopped about 50 feet from the crash site, and they finally saw the wreckage. The Pelican was nearly unidentifiable. It had barreled nose first into the street, bounced into a building, and finally fell off the side of the building and landed on its top in the middle of the street. The bay doors were lodged open. A few bodies lay strewn half in and half out. A warthog seemed to be the only piece of machinery that was relatively alright considering the wreck. It was on its back on top of the wreckage, still anchored to the ship.

"Mike, I'm not gettin' any enemy readings. It looks all clear. I'm picked up one human life form, significantly weakened; possibly the pilot." Hor announced quietly. Mike nodded and made the motion. The twins covered the flanks; a few of the other men covered the rear. The rest ran into the small crater and took cover. A quick whistle sounded, and the other men ran behind them, diving into the crater with them.

Mike surveyed the carnage. There were a few bodies out of the ship. There were a few more inside it. He looked into the ship further and saw that the cockpit door was open. Nobody could be seen inside. Suddenly, a cable snapped and the warthog shifted.

"Heads up!" A shout came. Mike dove as the warthog slid off the ship and crashed onto the ground. He raised his battle rifle up and took aim at the figure emerging on top of the ship. He lowered it when he saw that it was, indeed, a human. The other men stared as this guy dropped the plasma cutter he used to free the warthog.

"Lieutenant Giovanni Scalia?" Mike asked uncertainly. Many officers were notorious for crying for help at the slightest hint of danger or fear. To find an officer that not only wasn't begging for help, but was actually doing something to help his situation was damn near unheard of. Not only that, he'd even shouted a warning to them. This guy was truly something else.

"That's right. You guys the 209th?" He grinned and asked. Mike laughed and extended his hand out to help him down. Jas grabbed his hand and hopped down onto the hood of the warthog.

"Yes, sir, what's left of us at least." Mike replied.

"What? Did you just actually call me sir?" Jas asked, unbelievably.

"Yes, sir. You are still an officer, even if we are rescuing you." He answered.

"You don't have to; I don't give a damn about formality. I'll be happy with a beer, a woman, or a gun. Right now, I've got one of those three â€" so I'm a happy guy." The officer laughed. Mike smiled big. This was the first officer he'd met in forever that was minus a stick up his ass.

"Sir, I've got contacts!" Hor shouted. They all snapped back to reality. Jas grabbed the pistol at his side. Mike raised his rifle and dropped down.

"How many?" Mike demanded.

"Eight."

"It's a scout force." Jas mumbled. Mike nodded in agreement.

"Greg, Andrew â€" I want you to flank from the left and right at the same time. Take out the two jackals. You greenhorns, I want you to just aim for the grunts. Hor, Lieutenant â€" Let's take out the elite." The Master Sergeant quickly issued his commands. His troops moved as fast as he did and within moments were in position. Soon, they saw the small scout force. These troops usually mopped up any civilians they saw. Sometimes they took prisoners. Most of the time, they did not. Mike looked behind a destroyed car on the road and saw Greg checking his ammo. On the opposite side of the street, he could see through collapsed wall of a building to the sight of Andrew looking down the barrel of his rifle through a window. Within moments, the energy shields of the jackals failed. Gunfire crossed the street from both directions. Soon, the shields were no longer functional and the jackals fell. The twins ducked down to reload. The rest of the troops opened up. The greenhorns were horribly inaccurate. The scout force fired back, their plasma weapons scorching the ground. One greenhorn took a plasma blast to the face, decapitating him immediately. He fell backwards lifelessly. The other greenies looked on in horror.

"FOCUS!" Jas shouted fiercely. The troops quickly regained their composure and resumed their firing. The grunts began falling. Finally, the elite in the rear rushed ahead. Hor and Mike opened fire. The shield protecting the alien began to overheat and disintegrate. Jas leaned forward with his pistol and aimed carefully. He fired three shots. The first shot took out an eye. The second shot missed due to the jerk of the head. The third shot entered its throat. It frantically reached for its neck, and then fell on the ground, flailing and gurgling. The blood gushed out like a geyser. The battle was over. Eight Covenant scouts died. One Human marine died. The odds were good. The twins entered the foxhole, handing Jas the still-gurgling elite's plasma rifle.

"Thanks boys. You all did very well. Don't worry about that one. His death wasn't your fault. Had you not done your job so well, we would have all died." Jas knew the speech. He knew what to tell the enlisted men when their friends died. He knew what to tell the grieving mothers and sisters when their sons and brothers didn't come home. He had a silver tongue, but it frequently got him in more trouble than he could handle.

"He's right. Our job here is done. HQ just sent the word. That other lieutenant and his squad we were looking for are dead. That scout

force we just wiped took them all out." Mike nearly whispered. The men looked at their feet. They just weren't fast enough for the Covenant. Jas lifted his head first and spit on the dirt. They looked up at him.

"I'd hate to be the one to interrupt this, but we need to get out of this city pronto. They're firing artillery in a few minutes. It's got a nuclear payload." He reminded. Mike bucked up and nodded in agreement.

"Let's move, boys. If we can get to a safe place, then we can reflect on the day. Now is not the time. Hor!"

"Sir?" Hor snapped to attention.

"Find us an LZ to get us off this planet." Mike ordered. Hor went to work contacting Fleetcom HQ. As they began their march, Jas walked next to Mike.

"I know where we can go." Jas mentioned casually. Mike looked over.

"Where's that, sir?" He asked. Jas pointed to his 1 o'clock.

"About 50 clicks that way. It'll take us all night to get there, but the 25th Tactical has a communications tower held."

"Hopefully they'll still have it." Mike mused.

"They will."

14. Chapter 14

After the brilliant maneuver in space, Nitoka's wing returned to the Orion for rearming. They'd lost only a few of their pilots, but considering how many thousands of Covenants they'd killed, it was a necessary loss. The battered and overheated Longswords entered the docking bay slowly, their engines whining and sputtering. The huge bay doors hummed as they slid closed, blocking some of the plasma fire from Covenant fighters. As they took their positions in the bays, each fighter quickly powered down. Clamps extended to hold them in place. Cables and hoses connected to their respective points. The fuel line attached and began pumping. The wires made contact between the Orion and the Longsword's computers. Data transferred between the two. Diagnostics were run. Technicians began repairs as mechanical arms reloaded the missiles and bullets.

Nitoka stood uneasy next to the Captain looking over the whole bay. The feeling of returning to combat was never pleasant. These little delays to reload just reminded her of it. The other pilots sat around a radio listening to the chatter from the planet. With the war in space raging, they had no idea what the planet combat was like. David listened especially close for word of his brother.

"...Try going left and distracting them, we'll plant explosives on the bridgeâ€|"

"...No signâ€| Needâ€| Oh Godâ€|"

"...Roger that, 209th returning with officer, the other is deadâ€¦" The pilots sat in dismay. The war was going even worse planetside. David sat in silence. He listened to the sounds of war. The voices were men who were probably about to die. They very well could have been their last communications. He hoped to hear word of his brother, but fear was all he heard.

"...Lance Corporal Charles with the 25th tactical, reporting to anyone who can hearâ€¦ Marinesâ€¦ regroup with usâ€¦ coordinatesâ€¦ 45' northâ€¦ repeatâ€¦ 20' westâ€¦ northâ€¦ communications towerâ€¦ come to usâ€¦" David immediately perked up at the sound of his brother's company. He jumped over two other pilots and scrambled to grab the transmitter. The other pilots looked on in confusion as he practically yelled into it.

"25th Tactical, this is Lt. David Pasley on board the Orion, do you copy, over?"

"...Roger that, Pasleyâ€¦ hereâ€¦ go ahead, over." The crackling reply came back. David's heart raced.

"25th Tactical, is my brother with you? Private Jonathan Pasley, is he with you, over?" He blurted. There was silence. A few crackling transmissions came through, but nothing from Charles or the 25th Tactical. "Lance Corporal Charles, do you read me, over?" It seemed like eternity, but only a few tense seconds went by.

"David?" The familiar voice of his brother came through. David exhaled. His grin stretched from ear to ear. The other pilots smiled and patted each other. At least the war was going well for the Pasley family.

"Roger that, big brother. That's Lt. Pasley to you." David joked. A static-laced laugh came back.

"...Holding a tower nearâ€¦ 12 and 11â€¦ How's the Orion? How isâ€¦ -inter Moon? Over." JP asked. David looked over at another pilot, who was quickly looking up the status of the Winter Moon.

"Orion is fine, Winter Moon is damaged, but okay. They've got her absorbing fire from hitting smaller ships. What's this about a tower?"

"â€¦Communications towerâ€¦ we can see both citiesâ€¦ sniping gruntsâ€¦ funâ€¦ few days, unless we get pulled out soonerâ€¦ got to runâ€¦ we're broadcasting a safety beaconâ€¦ marines come hereâ€¦ Be safe. Over." And with that, JP was gone. David set the transmitter down and sat next the other pilots. Nitoka walked up behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders. He looked up. She was smiling.

"I'm glad your brother is okay, Lieutenant." She said softly. He smiled back at her, but kept it reserved.

"Thank you, ma'am." David replied. A few beeps came over his personal communicator. It was an automated message from his ship's computer. It informed him that rearming, repairs, and refueling was complete. He was ready to fly again. Soon, so did Nitoka's and the other pilots. They began their brisk march back to their ships. As soon as they all were back in, the ships powered up and Nitoka came on the

radio.

"Alright, pilots, listen up. The hard part is done. We've done the damage we needed to do, so now we move onto our second objectives. We have to keep the Pelicans and dropships safe as they evacuate civilians, then we have to escort them when they evacuate our Marines. Follow my lead. Are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am!" The pilots confirmed. The Longswords powered up and released from their clamps. With Nitoka in the lead, the bay doors slid open and they blasted back into the void of space.

JP sat on the top deck of the tower on the balcony. He looked up at the stars and ships overhead. He could see the plasma fire, the MAC rounds, and even some of the archer missiles. It was awe-inspiring. He took great comfort in knowing for certain that his younger brother was safe and doing well. He took a bite of the small energy bar that served as his dinner. It contained a full day's supply of vitamins, minerals, and supplements. It also provided special regenerative property for sleeping that made you wake up feeling like a million bucks. It was also a tasty chocolate flavor.

Charles sat next to him, eating his bar. JP noted that it was peanut butter flavored, and then spoke up softly.

"Hey, Charles?"

"Yea?" Charles answered in between chews. Many marines joked that as well as providing all this health for them, it gave their jaws a work-out as well.

"Thanks for getting that long-range radio working. Talking to my brother meant a lot to me." Charles sat in silence for a moment, chewing. JP looked over and noticed the somber nod from his squad-mate. "What's the matter?"

"When I was still just a private, my brother was a Staff Sergeant. Brian was a great soldier. He saw action on Viridian 5, but that was the last we heard of him. The Covenant knew they couldn't take that planet and completely eradicated all life on it from orbit." Charles answered softly. JP was crushed. He had no idea that his friend had an older brother. "You're welcome, JP. Don't let anything happen to him. As soon as you both can, don't put in to enlist again. You served, you fought, and you did well. Just go home and take your well deserved rest."

"Are you serious?" JP blurted. He couldn't believe it. He knew that Charles was hurt, but he couldn't abandon his duty to humanity.

"Yea, why shouldn't you? I don't plan on re-enlisting." Charles answered, throwing his wrapper off the side of the balcony. JP did the same and faced him.

"Listen, I know you're upset about your brother, and I'm sorry for your loss, but I can't do that. I can't abandon my faith in humanity. Your brother died doing something great. Many men live their lives wondering if they made a difference. Marines don't have that problem." JP tried to explain. He borrowed a quote from an American leader of ages past for further effect.

"Save it, Pasley. You didn't know my brother." Charles sneered.

"And you don't know mine, but I know something you don't. I know that if you quit and just give up and dwell on it all your life, you're going to be miserable. You're going to disappoint and disrespect his memory. Do you think that's what he wants you to do? If I happen to die on the field, I know my brother won't give up, because the thought of wasting away doing nothing with his life would crush him and be like throwing away all of our memories together. Don't do it to Brian." JP continued. Charles stared at him, his face unmoved. Finally he blinked, sighed, and spoke.

"Do you really think so? Am I being selfish?" He wondered aloud.

"Yea, Charles, you are. You're not the only one to lose a family member in war. Think of the civilians today who lost family who weren't even fighting. I don't know about you, but I'm not going to sit back and let the Covenant find Earth and kill me as I sit around doing nothing. If they're going to find Earth, I'm going to give them a hell of a time of doing anything about it." JP proudly announced. Charles couldn't help but to smile.

"Maybe you're right, greenie. Maybe you're right. Thanks." Charles got up, patted JP on the shoulder, and entered the doorway into the tower. Pearce sat on the other side of the balcony, but heard every word.

"That was beautiful, darling." He joked.

"Oh, piss off." JP laughed.

Their grueling pace had been set back in City 12, but the 209th wasn't slowing. They'd traveled over 40 clicks in an hour. The warthog liberated from Jas' pelican had proved roomy enough for the few men. Its engines whirred rhythmically as they traversed the terrain. Jas fumbled with his small navigation unit, constantly checking their course. One of the twins, Greg, was driving. His brother was on the gun, the rest sat as small as they could in the bay behind him. He rode shotgun.

"Correct course 3 degrees east." Jas commented. Greg nodded and slightly turned the wheel. He turned back to the other men. Mike sat directly behind him next to Hor, who was behind Greg. They nodded in approval.

"Sir, we're only 5 clicks away." Greg announced. Jas checked his navigation unit and confirmed it.

"There was an LZ and base camp about 3 clicks away, but I'm pretty sure it got wiped out." Jas explained to him. Greg continued driving, aware that they would soon come across Covenant. They hadn't seen many leaving the city, but their signs were becoming more and more obvious out here in the wilderness. Jas once again turned to the men behind him.

"What's up?" Mike asked.

"We're going to have to go off-road to get to the tower. It's gonna

get real bumpy. Hold tight." He replied. The two greenies in the back gripped the warthog tight as they began leaving the road they were traveling on. It remained relatively smooth, but they knew it would get worse.

"There's the camp, sir." Greg announced as they saw the wreckage of what was once the camp he dropped the 25th Tactical off at. Jas pointed to a small opening in the woods.

"Follow that another 1 and a half clicks. You'll see the tower at the end." He ordered. Greg nodded and continued driving. Jas reached down and grabbed the short-range radio the warthog contained. They entered the woods as Jas flipped the radio on and began filtering through the channels. Greg hit a bump, and they heard a shout. Looking back, one of the privates had fallen out the back.

"Brakes!" Mike shouted as he dove out to get the man, who was lying in the dirt, not moving. Greg quickly stopped the warthog and looked back. The man was unconscious, but alive. Jas hopped out to assist Mike, who was lifting the man's upper body. Jas grabbed his legs and hoisted him into the back of the warthog. Mike pointed an angry finger at the other greenhorn as Jas dropped the man's rifle in with him.

"Your new responsibility is to ensure that this man not only survives, but is revived when we get to the tower. Do you get me?" The Master Sergeant ordered. The private quickly nodded.

"Yes, sir!" He chirped in fear. Jas shook his head and walked back to his seat. Mike couldn't help but to agree with him. As he was about to hop back in, he heard a shout. He turned just in time to see three covenant grunts firing their plasma pistols towards the warthog. They all immediately took a combat position and fired on the enemy. As soon as their foes were dispatched, Hor pointed out a plasma burn on the side of the warthog, near where the unconscious greenhorn sat.

"Son of aâ€¦ Well, should we investigate further enemy activity?" Mike asked Jas.

"LOOK OUT!" Andrew shouted, his chaingun turret spinning behind them. It took quick aim and began unleashing hell on the Covenant Elite that hid behind a tree, hoping to surprise the "victorious" humans. The monster quickly fell dead in a pool of blood.

"Christ, Hodgdon. You married?" Jas asked, still grasping the situation.

"No, sirâ€¦" He replied, confused.

"Well then you obviously shoot better than you screw, 'cause if you were as good girls would be all over you." He laughed. It took Andrew a minute to get the joke while the other men laughed hard. Finally he grasped it and smiled weakly, knowing he'd just been ripped on.

"It's all in good fun, Andrew. It's the Lieutenant's way of showing you his pride in your talents." Mike explained. Andrew nodded and returned to his normal self. They hopped back in the warthog, and Jas grabbed the short-range radio as Greg punched the accelerator.

"25th Tactical, do you copy, over?" Nothing. Jas tried again.
"Repeat, 25th Tactical, do you copy, over?" Finally, a weak reply came through.

"Copy that, this is Lance Corporal Charles with the 25th Tactical, over." He sounded tired or faded away, but the men were relieved at a reply.

"Charles, this is Lt. Scalia. I dropped you off in the Pelican this morning, over."

"Copy that, good to hear from you, sir. Over." The voice seemed more energized now.

"We're looking to hole up for the night in that pretty tower I helped you with, over." Jas got straight to the point. The voice came back very faintly, as if her were speaking to someone in the background.

"Roger that, sir. I'm having the men unblock the doors and prepare for your arrival. Request numbers, over."

"Seven and a warthog." Jas answered simply. A few more muffled sounds in the background came through before he heard Charles again.

"Roger, the doors are clear. Unfortunately there's no way to get that 'hog in here, but if you leave it outside the main doors, it should help us barricade it, over." Charles explained.

"Understood, soldier. We're entering the clearing now, over." With that, Jas hung up the transmitter. With a final acknowledgement, the transmission ended. Jas turned to Mike.

"Told ya." He said simply. Mike grinned.

"I like the idea of being wrong, sometimes. Sometimes." He laughed back. They entered the clearing, hopping over a small foxhole. Greg smashed the gas and the warthog screamed towards the tower. It was closing in rapidly; they'd be there in a matter of seconds.

"Private! Revive that man!" Mike ordered. The greenhorn waved a smelling salt in front of the man's nose, quickly bringing him to. Greg slid the warthog sideways in front of the doors, which swung open. Two men stood there welcoming them. Private Pasley and Lance Corporal Thompson stood in the doorway, smiling big. Jas hopped out and warmly shook the hand of JP.

"Good to see you're okay, private." Jas greeted. JP grinned big.

"I'm glad you're okay. We heard you got shot down and I feared the worst." JP replied.

"I see," Jas mused. "I wouldn't be okay had these here Marines not helped out, right Master Sergeant Protich?" Mike hopped out of the back of the warthog and greeted both of the men.

"Just doing our jobs, sir."

15. Chapter 15

There were only a few fighters left. The war had turned horribly worse in space. The Covenant knew the planet was theirs. They could eradicate all life planetside in a matter of moments, so their focus turned to the reeling fleet, crippled and diminishing rapidly. The seraph fighters swooped suddenly and fiercely onto the fighters, eliminating the majority of the fighters the fleet had. Four Longswords flew in formation. Nitoka lead the pattern, Pasley took second, and the other two fell behind.

"That was my last missile, but at least I took one down." Pasley panted into the radio. Another voice came back.

"Yea, I'm out too, and my left thruster is misfiring."

"Hold on, you two. I'm going to radio fleet and inform them that we need refitted." Nitoka calmly replied as she dodged plasma bursts. The others followed suit, hoping to survive a little longer so they could get home. David thought about JP, holed up on the surface. He knew that the enemy controlled almost the entire surface, and that they could be engaged at any moment. His reverie was broken with a jolt and a crash. Red lights illuminated the cockpit, a warning siren began blaring. A plasma bolt struck his thrusters, knocking out all power to his engines and propulsion systems.

"I'm hit! I'm hit bad!" David shouted. His systems began to flicker and shut down.

"Take down the son of a bitch that fired at him! I'll tow him back to the Orion!" Nitoka ordered. Breaking formation, Nitoka swooped backwards and fired a fuel transfer line, which usually doubled as a winch. The other two fighters joined into a crossfire pattern and lit up the lone seraph. It was only a matter of moments before David felt himself being uncontrollably hurled towards the Orion, not far away. The seraph that hit him soon was non-existent.

"He's down, Lieutenant!" One of the men confidently reported.

"Good," Nitoka answered without hesitating. "Now cover me while I get Pasley back to the ship, then get inside and dock."

Captain Ward was at his wits' end. His ship was crumbling before his eyes â€" again. The second most heavily defended planet under UNSC control was falling, and fleet command had him absorbing fire from hitting smaller ships. It was a hell of a way to repay the ship that single-handedly became responsible for the destruction of three Covenant ships. He strode about the deck, sword in hand, pipe in mouth â€" mumbling to himself and suddenly barking orders when the moment came.

"There's an incoming transmission from Fleetcom HQ, sir!" A tech officer announced. The captain replaced his sword and grabbed his pipe firmly.

"Put it through." He ordered simply. He looked at his main viewing

screen, which currently displayed a battle map of Reach. With a few beeps, the screen suddenly blinked to the face of Vice Admiral Dixon, the right hand man of Admiral Freemont. Dixon was known to be more lighthearted, but quick to use force. He was also notorious for his tactics of overwhelming force and absolutely no mercy. He rose quickly through the ranks after leading a group of three UNSC vessels through a year-long campaign that saw the demise of 17 Covenant ships without a single boarding action or casualty with the exception of one maintenance technician due to complications of undiagnosed diabetes. As soon as his promotion to Vice Admiral came in, he renamed the destroyer he was stationed upon the UNSC Jester, which is what the dead man's friends called him, in his honor.

"Vice Admiral, sir!" Captain Ward snapped to attention with a salute. Dixon nodded and saluted back. Ward stood at ease as Dixon began to speak.

"The war is not going well, Captain. We must take drastic measures to assure the survival of humanity, even if it means losing Reach." The Vice Admiral began.

"Yes, sir. What did you have in mind?" Ward asked.

"A full retreat. Enact the Cole Protocol, select random coordinates, and get the hell out of there. We can't win, so why bother letting our boys die for no reason?" Dixon sharply explained.

"Immediately, sir?"

"Yes. Within the next hour, I want every ship out of the area. Evacuations are complete, yes?" Ward turned to a crewman, who quickly nodded.

"Yes, sir, but I don't know if all of the troops are evacuated," Ward answered. "We need a little more time to confirm."

"There isn't any time. I've just ordered the immediate evacuation of all of our ships. If there are any Marines on that planet, they're probably dead or they will be by the time we get there. The risk is just too great." Dixon solemnly answered. Ward cut off the screen and turned away without saying a word. His temper usually got the better of him, but he knew he'd just made a huge mistake.

"Evacuate, sir?" Schroeder asked.

"No. No, no, no. Contact the nearest destroyers and get me their captains." He commanded, pulling his sword.

"Sir, I've got the captains of the Orion and the Pillar of Autumn on the line." Schroeder informed.

"Put them through. We will need their help to get our boys out of there."

"Alright, snap to, boys!" Nitoka shouted to the pilots. They rose from their seats around the communications equipment and faced their leader. She strode to them briskly, a demeanor of business about her. They dreaded any news she had at this point.

"Yes, ma'am!" They acknowledged. She looked at them. She saw their

fear and their anxiety. She knew what she was about to tell them would make them happy, but make them even more scared. She hated fear. Fear is what makes you hesitate. Fear is what gets good pilots killed. She tried her hardest not to fear.

"I've got one last assignment for you before we jump," she began. "Every other UNSC ship minus two others are leaving in an hour. They're going to make a blind jump a short distance away, then return to the far side of the orbit to cover us." The others looked at her vacantly. They knew it was bad news. She'd just assigned them an order without explaining it.

"Ma'am, what do you mean when you say three ships are staying behind?" One of the nervous pilots asked. She grimaced.

"There are still boys down on that planet, and I'll be damned if we don't at least try to rescue them before we retreat. The two Halcyon-class ships will provide us with cover from plasma hits and boarding parties. The Orion will provide most of the fire against the ships directly. The fighters will be covering groups of transports going to the surface and then coming back. After that, we jump and leave Reach to them."

Before she finished speaking, the other pilots were ready to launch.

End
file.